HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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§ Members of the Government listed under more than one Department

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—The Rt Hon. Dame Caroline Spelman, MP
5 December 2016
Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

1. Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect of unskilled migration on levels of employment.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The latest labour market statistics show that more British people are in work than ever before, the unemployment rate is at its lowest level for over a decade and nine in 10 people in jobs are UK nationals. However, the Prime Minister has been clear that as we conduct negotiations to leave the European Union, it must be a priority to regain more control of the numbers of people who come here from Europe.

Ian Austin: There is no point in national London politicians lecturing people in places such as the black country with national statistics, because this has different impacts in different communities. Why are low-skilled migrants still coming here when we have hundreds of thousands of unemployed people in Britain? Why have the Government not stopped companies from just advertising jobs abroad or using workers from overseas to undercut wages here? And why do the Government not require large firms to train up local apprentices if they do have to hire someone from abroad?

Amber Rudd: It is a little rich getting that sort of lecture from a Labour Member, because the Labour party failed to put controls on in the 2004 enlargement and most of its Members who were in charge then have admitted what a mistake that was. There are no lectures coming from my party—only hard answers. The answer is that we will be restricting immigration when we move to leaving the EU.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): Does the Home Secretary agree that students should be removed from the “tens of thousands” target? Does she also agree that as the data are extremely poor, we should strain every sinew to try to get better quality data so that we can form a judgment about whether—and if so, how—we can ensure that exports, which is what foreign students are, are maximised in this country?

Amber Rudd: I share my right hon. Friend’s view that students play an important role in contributing to the economy and are most welcome in the UK. The internationally recognised definition of a “migrant” is someone coming here for more than 12 months, so they are likely to stay within that definition, although I am aware that there are different views on this matter.

Mr Speaker: Absolutely hopelessly long. Sorry, but that was really hopeless and we have to do a lot better.

Amber Rudd: I share my right hon. Friend’s view that students play an important role in contributing to the economy and are most welcome in the UK. The internationally recognised definition of a “migrant” is someone coming here for more than 12 months, so they are likely to stay within that definition, although I am aware that there are different views on this matter.

Mr Speaker: Perhaps the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee can be the author of the textbook.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker—the pressure is on. The Home Secretary refers to the measure of net migration, but she was asked about the target. Does she agree that international students should be taken out of the Government’s target, as the Foreign Secretary has said over the weekend and as the Chancellor of the Exchequer seemed to hint some weeks ago? Does she think that foreign students should be included in the target?
Amber Rudd: As I told the House, and as the right hon. Lady is aware, there are different views on this. The definition that I referred to was the one for international students, which is held by the Office for National Statistics; more than 12 months and they represent an immigrant, and therefore are part of the numbers.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I am not sure that students are unskilled in any case. Nevertheless, is it not the fact that there are people in this country who will not do the jobs that unskilled migrants do? Is not the point, therefore, that in the black country and elsewhere it should be not Brussels after Brexit but the United Kingdom that will decide which migrants are needed to do the jobs that UK people will not do?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend raises an important point. One in 10 18 to 24-year-olds is still unemployed, and we want them to have the opportunity to take up these jobs. That is one reason why, alongside other initiatives such as the apprenticeship levy, we are encouraging businesses to participate more in local employment and work more with local young people to make sure that they can take those jobs.

Michelle Thomson (Edinburgh West) (Ind): The UK relies on more than 80,000 seasonal workers to pick its fruit and veg every year, with the Financial Times recently suggesting that 98% of those workers come from within the EU. Will the Government commit to protecting access for seasonal workers from the EU to safeguard our agricultural sector going forward?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady has raised an important question, and I know that the National Farmers Union met my colleague the Minister for Immigration recently to discuss exactly that point. We are aware how necessary it will be to ensure that we have some sort of seasonal scheme in place, and we are looking carefully at it.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Has the Home Secretary had any discussions with her Cabinet colleagues about the pull factor of the increase in the living wage and the impact it may have on immigration?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend rightly says that the national living wage could be a pull factor, but other factors are also at play, such as currency fluctuations, which can have the opposite effect, and I urge him to consider those.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Assuming that a deal is reached under which EU citizens who were here before a certain cut-off date can remain after we leave the European Union, can the Home Secretary tell the House how the Home Office will document them—we are talking about an estimated 3 million people—so that employers and landlords will know thereafter to whom legally they can offer a job or accommodation and therefore distinguish them from those EU citizens who arrived after that?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We are aware that there is a certain expectation and concern about the European Union citizens here. As the Prime Minister has said, she hopes to be able to reassure them, but it is right that we do that while looking also at the over 1 million UK citizens in the rest of the European Union. There will be a need to have some sort of documentation—he is entirely right on that—but we will not set it out yet. We will do it in a phased approach to ensure that we use all the technological advantages that we are increasingly able to harness to ensure that all immigration is carefully handled.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that the London School of Economics Centre for Economic Performance looked at the issue of immigration employment regionally? It found that the areas with the largest increase in EU immigration had not seen the sharpest falls in employment or wages since 2008. One author of the report said that there was still no evidence of an overall negative impact of immigration on jobs or wages. On the question of students, there is an increasing consensus in all parts of the House that students should be taken out of the immigration target. Technically, anyone who stays more than 12 months may be an immigrant, but in practice, they should not be in the target.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady might want to take up her interesting views with the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) who seems to take a slightly different view. One thing that is for certain is that when we do leave the European Union, we will have more control over immigration from the European Union and we will be making sure that the immigration that we do get from the European Union achieves the right balance of attracting the type of people who can really boost the UK businesses that need it.

Immigration Rules

2. Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): If she will make an assessment of the potential merits of applying different immigration rules to Scotland and other constituent parts of the UK.

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): Immigration remains a reserved matter and we will consider the needs of the UK as a whole. Applying different immigration rules to different parts of the United Kingdom will complicate the immigration system, harming its integrity and causing difficulties for employers who need the flexibility to deploy their staff to other parts of the UK.

Stephen Gethins: I know that the Home Secretary agrees with me when we say that Vote Leave was irresponsibly short of detail during its campaign, but one of the details that it did give us was when the former Justice Secretary promised that Scotland would be responsible for its immigration policy. Is that still the case, or is that planned?

Mr Goodwill: If the hon. Gentleman had been paying attention to what I just said, he would know that it remains a UK competency. Given that the Scottish people voted in 2014 to maintain Scotland’s position as part of the United Kingdom, may I suggest that he looks at the powers in the Scotland Act 2016 to make Scotland a more attractive place in which people will want to come to live and work?
Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Notwithstanding all the attractions of living in Scotland, is not the balance of population movement still to the south?

Mr Goodwill: We do have a specific Scotland shortage occupation list, which recognises the need to attract certain types of occupation to Scotland and which takes account of Scotland’s needs.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): One group of families that a distinct immigration system for Scotland would help are the “skype” families. There are 15,000 kids across the United Kingdom who are separated from a parent abroad because this Government have the least family-friendly immigration rules in the whole of the developed world. Almost half of Scotland’s people do not earn enough to meet the crazy financial threshold to bring the partner whom they love from abroad to live here. Will the Minister for Immigration allow the Scottish Government to set their own threshold, or how will he explain to those children why they have to live apart from one parent?

Mr Goodwill: At least the Scottish National party is honest about the fact that it wants to increase immigration, unlike the Labour party, which repeatedly refuses to say that that is its policy.

Mr Speaker: I am sure there is no suggestion that anybody would be anything other than honest in this Chamber.

Mr Goodwill: We do have a specific Scotland shortage occupation list, which recognises the needs of Scotland’s people to a specific job and employer. We have Tech City visas, which have special rules for certain UK cities, and we do operate a common travel area and an open border with Ireland, which is a completely distinct immigration system. Does the Secretary of State accept that there is no practical reason why we cannot see significantly different rules applying in Scotland for those significantly different needs?

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that even though a lot of work has been done, some forces have a long, long way to go to make that quota better?

Mr Goodwill: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The police have done a great deal of work on diversity generally, particularly seeing more women coming in, and force. I hope that forces right across the country will be very focused on this as they go through their recruitment exercises now.

Mr Goodwill: I recognise the problem and have had meetings with a number of right hon. and hon. Members on the issue. I do not recall, however, that during the referendum campaign the fishermen around the coast of our country were campaigning to repatriate powers so that they could attract more Filipinos to work in the industry. I understand the problem and will continue to meet right hon. and hon. Members to see what we can do to help.

Brandon Lewis: Police forces across the country are currently recruiting. The police funding formula has always been protected. We are doing a formula review. I will be meeting the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable of Northumberland shortly to discuss that and feed it into the review. The force there has benefited over the past couple of years from the ability to increase precepts above most others due to de minimis.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): All police officers deserve our praise, but volunteer special constables who serve on foot in the local areas in which they live
represent their local communities particularly well. Will the Minister congratulate Northamptonshire on the efforts that it is making to recruit more volunteer special constables?

Brandon Lewis: I am happy to endorse my hon. Friend’s comments. The volunteers in the police force, who we are looking to empower even further through the Policing and Crime Bill, do a fantastic job and deserve our great thanks.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): How long, how long? I do not normally believe in quotas, but really diverse police forces have been a long time coming in this country, so let us see some action. Let us see some action, too, on recruiting more officers to police the roads in our country, where people drive like lunatics because they know that there is no one there to catch them.

Brandon Lewis: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has joined our cause after so many years of seeing diversity going nowhere under the Labour Government. It is this Government who have driven diversity by trusting local police forces to make sure that when they recruit, they recruit to represent their communities. That is why we are seeing BME representation going up, and representation of women going up. We need to do more and I hope the hon. Gentleman will join us in encouraging forces to do that in their current recruitment.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that a more diverse police force has been an aim of forces such as the Metropolitan police since the 1970s? Is he aware that the underlying reason why there has been limited success is, sadly, continuing poor police-community relations? And is he aware that funding cuts are restricting the recruitment of officers, whatever their colour or gender?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady may like to note that that development, working with retailers both online and on the high street, and legislating for tougher sentences. During October, 21 police forces took part in a week of action against knife crime. In Essex, test purchases were conducted, habitual knife carriers were stopped and searched, and 12 individuals were arrested.

Freedom of Movement

4. Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with her counterparts in other EU member states on freedom of movement.

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Prime Minister has made it clear that article 50 will be triggered before the end of March 2017. We are still working hard on our negotiating position, but we do not want to show our hand of cards before we get into the poker game. However, I assure the hon. Lady that we are determined to get the right deal for Britain.

Heidi Alexander: The Government’s approach to Brexit seems to hinge on their ability to persuade other European member states to allow Britain to opt out of current freedom of movement rules while retaining tariff-free access to the single market. Can the Minister name me one European Minister who has told him that that might be possible?

Mr Goodwill: There are certainly 3.2 million EU nationals in the UK, and it is in their interests to be able to satisfy their Governments about their status here. As the Prime Minister has said, the only circumstance in which we would not want to guarantee their status would be if the status of UK nationals living elsewhere were not similarly guaranteed.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that free movement of workers, together with the operation of the laws of supply and demand, inevitably depresses wage levels in this country?

Mr Goodwill: I do not have a degree in economics, but it is true that supply and demand would operate in this area. That is why we are determined to be able to control the numbers of those coming from the EU, just as we already control numbers coming from outside the EU.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): In any discussions, will the Minister raise the issue referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin): recruitment agencies, for example, that exploit workers from the EU and undercut UK workers by advertising for unskilled workers outside the UK, but not in the UK?

Mr Goodwill: All these matters will need to be discussed, but I add the point already made by the Home Secretary. When the eastern European countries joined the European Union, transitional arrangements that would have protected jobs to some extent were not put in place.

Knife Crime

5. James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to tackle knife crime.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): Tackling knife crime is a priority and we are taking firm action, including warning young people about the dangers of carrying knives, working with retailers both online and on the high street, and legislating for tougher sentences. During October, 21 police forces took part in a week of action against knife crime. In Essex, test purchases were conducted, habitual knife carriers were stopped and searched, and 12 individuals were arrested.

James Duddridge: I thank the Minister for reminding us of the action that Essex police are already taking. Over a four-month period, the knife amnesty got 311 knives off the streets. Will the Minister commit to continuing a knife amnesty and will she come to Southend to see the complexities and interaction between knife crime and drugs crime in Southend?
Sarah Newton: I am very grateful to my colleague for raising that point and I will be delighted to visit him in Southend. He will be pleased to know that the Home Office is working with the Essex police and crime commissioner, along with the Institute of Community Safety, to see what more we can do to help the situation in Essex. I understand that they will agree a plan of local action during a meeting this week.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Last week, a memorial service was held in Leicester for Tyler Thompson, who was killed with a knife aged only 16. The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) said that 311 knives had been given in during the amnesty in Essex. Does the Minister have the figures for the whole country?

Sarah Newton: I do not have the answer to hand at the moment, but this was the first week, with 21 forces engaged in Operation Sceptre. That had a hugely beneficial effect, in terms of not only the surrendering of weapons across the country but arrests across the country. It sent out an incredibly clear, firm message: we will not tolerate people carrying knives as they will use them harmfully on innocent citizens.

Asset Recovery Regime

6. David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to confiscate money from criminals; and what plans she has further to strengthen the asset recovery regime. [907620]

9. Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to confiscate money from criminals; and what plans she has further to strengthen the asset recovery regime. [907623]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Since 2010, £1.2 billion of criminal assets have been recovered, and a further £3 billion have been frozen. The Serious Crime Act 2015 provided new powers, and the Criminal Finances Bill will further improve our capability, but there is more to be done. Next year we will publish a new asset recovery action plan, and the Cabinet Office will look at the UK’s response to economic crime more broadly. This will include looking at the effectiveness of our organisational framework and the capabilities, resources and powers available to the organisations that tackle economic crime.

David Warburton: I thank the Home Secretary for that. The Criminal Finances Bill contains many measures to combat illegal and immoral financial activity, but can my right hon. Friend confirm that the new legislation put in place.

Amber Rudd: What my right hon. Friend says is welcome, but can she assure me that the asset recovery regime will extend to all forms of crime, and particularly tax evasion? The potential financial gains from tax evasion are large, and whatever people think about it being a victimless crime, it is wrong, and the regime should apply to it as well.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is an important part of the new proceeds of crime legislation, and, yes, it will be included in it.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What discussions is the Home Secretary having with her European counterparts to ensure that once we leave the European Union, we will have access to all the data we can currently access in relation to assets held abroad?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Lady. Lady that I am having extensive discussions with European counterparts and with European bodies that help to keep us safe, so that when we do leave the European Union, we will, as far as possible, be able to have access to that information. When people voted to leave the European Union, they did not vote to be less safe.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Further to that, the simple question is: will we be a member of Europol post exit from the European Union?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that we recently opted into the new elements of Europol. In terms of looking forward, we are in discussions on that matter. I can tell him that we are one of the largest contributors to Europol. We play an important part in it. It will be part of the ongoing negotiations. 1

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): What practical measures have been put in place to combat money laundering and terrorist financing?

Amber Rudd: I refer my hon. Friend to the new legislation. She is absolutely right that the trouble is that criminals will always try to get ahead of us in finding ways to launder their money and the proceeds of their activities. We are determined to make sure that we get ahead of them, which is why we are having the new legislation put in place.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that the cross-border flow of proceeds from criminal activity, corruption and tax evasion is estimated at over $1 trillion a year, and that half that money was looted from poor and developing countries? What steps is she taking to make it easier for these poor countries to recover stolen assets from UK, Crown dependency and overseas territory financial institutions?

Amber Rudd: We take dealing with the proceeds of crime incredibly seriously, and the idea that there are people who commit criminal acts and then come to the UK is very unwelcome. One of the elements we have to deal with is that is the new unexplained wealth orders. They do apply to foreign persons also in the UK, and they will go part of the way to addressing exactly what the hon. Lady describes in terms of the transfer of illegal funds.

1. [Official Report, 12 December 2016, Vol. 618, c. 3-4MC.]
Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children

8. Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that individual local authorities do not bear a disproportionate burden for supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): In July the Government launched the national transfer scheme to ensure a more equitable distribution of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children across the country. The scheme is designed to support local authorities like Peterborough City Council. In support of the national transfer scheme we also increased central Government funding to local authorities caring for unaccompanied children by up to 33%.

Mr Jackson: Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that in areas such as Peterborough, which has already borne a major burden in both EU and non-EU migration, we will not be expected to pay once again for the huge ongoing costs of children and young people who are unaccompanied minors—we have 40 such cases in Peterborough—and that we will receive bespoke central Government funding?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure my hon. Friend that each child that his council looks after does attract additional funding, so I hope that that will address his particular financial concerns about the council’s obligations. I would like to put on record our grateful thanks to Peterborough Council, which does a fantastic and generous job in looking after some of these most needy children.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Unlike almost every other EU country, the UK does not allow unaccompanied child refugees to sponsor their parents to join them—a situation that the Home Affairs Committee has described as “perverse”. Does the Home Secretary agree that it is in the best interests of the refugee children, as well as in the interests of our society, to allow them to be with their parents?

Amber Rudd: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s motive in making this point. However, I would respectfully say to him that that could have a very detrimental effect in terms of a pull factor, with children coming to this country—potentially being sent or indeed trafficked to this country—in order to have their parents brought over; so no, we will not be looking at it again.

10. Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): What is the proportion of (a) charges and (b) convictions for crimes of violence against the person relative to recorded offences in the most recent year for which data are available.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): For the year ending June 2016, 16% of violence against the person offences recorded by the police resulted in a charge or summons. There were almost 30,000 convictions for violence against the person offences in the year ending June 2016. That represents over 75% of the people prosecuted and shows a rise of more than 1,500 convictions on the previous year.

Joan Ryan: According to the Home Office data on crime in England and Wales, violence against the person and sexual offences have risen under this Government and their predecessor, while charges have fallen or broadly stayed the same, as in the case of sexual offences. In Enfield, we have seen an 11% increase in violent crime over the past year. Why should people trust the Government when public safety is being put at risk via these statistics and falling police numbers?

Brandon Lewis: The right hon. Lady may be confusing recorded crime with actual crime. The crime survey shows that violence is down by over 25% since 2010. We are seeing an increase in recorded crime. We should welcome that, because it shows a better recording of crime, and also, importantly, a willingness of victims to come forward.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): In 2014, the current Prime Minister said that there were “utterly unacceptable failings in the way police forces have recorded crime” and that this has let down victims. Yet all three forces inspected this August are not recording crimes properly. In Manchester, 17,000 violent crimes were simply ignored. Will the Minister tell this House why his Prime Minister failed to make any progress in two years?

Brandon Lewis: The Prime Minister—the previous Home Secretary—and the current Home Secretary are seeing a reduction in crime. The police should be proud of that while running things efficiently for the benefit of the
taxpayer. There is also an increase in recorded crime, which, as the Office for National Statistics itself has outlined, is because of the willingness of victims to come forward as a result of their increased confidence in the police to deal with the issues. That is to be welcomed.

Freedom of Expression (Religious Satire)

12. Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): What legal protections are in place to protect people’s freedom of expression with regard to religious satire.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Freedom of speech and religion are core values that make our country great. They are, indeed, protected in law. What is or is not a joke, or what constitutes satire, is, I believe, in the eye or ear of the beholder and is not, perhaps, for Government to opine on.

Mr Walker: Why did the Home Secretary and her Ministers not give voice to those principles during the manhunt and vilification of the gymnast Louis Smith?

Amber Rudd: One of the first actions that I took when I came to office in July was to publish a hate crime action plan, to which I refer my hon. Friend. It enables anybody who is the victim of any sort of hate crime, which I think is what he is referring to, to have the confidence to report what is going on and to make sure that the police take action so that they do not feel singled out and abused.

Immigration Detention/Adults at Risk Policy

13. Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): If she will take steps to (a) ensure that survivors of sexual and other gender-based violence are only held in immigration detention as a last resort and (b) monitor the effective implementation of the adults at risk policy.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): The intention of the adults at risk policy, developed as a result of the review by Stephen Shaw, is part of a wider programme of work that aims to improve the way in which vulnerable people in detention are managed. That should enable the delivery of the issue raised by the hon. Lady. The policy came into effect on 12 September, and the intention is to ask Stephen Shaw to carry out a short review in 2017 to assess progress.

Jess Phillips: The Government’s commitment to reduce the number of survivors of sexual violence in detention is welcome, but how will observers know whether that is happening? Is information now being collected on the numbers of women in detention who disclose that they are victims of sexual violence, and will that information be made available?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady is right to point out that we are taking a significant package of measures to make sure that people are detained for the minimum time possible, that their vulnerabilities are properly recognised and understood, and that access to mental health and other health services is made available. As I have said, we will ask for an independent review in the course of the year, to make sure that that is working.

Fraud

14. Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps she is taking to protect people from fraud and its effect on families and communities.

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): We have established a joint fraud taskforce, bringing together Government, law enforcement and the financial sector to tackle the crime of fraud. The recent arrest of 14 individuals involved in laundering the proceeds of international cybercrime also demonstrates how a multi-agency approach, including international partners, is crucial in tackling cybercrime and cyber-enabled fraud.

Mrs Murray: Fraud, both in person and online, is of great concern to my constituents in South East Cornwall, particularly among the elderly and vulnerable. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating voluntary organisations such as citizens advice bureau and Victim Support on their work in supporting fraud prevention through education and in supporting victims of crime?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out the very important work that many voluntary bodies do in raising awareness. Citizens Advice, Age Concern and Victim Support make sure, including in the lead-up to Christmas, that people are aware of the pitfalls that await them online and of the scandalous fraudsters who pick on some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I certainly welcome any voluntary work that can be done, but as the level of fraud now stands at £193 billion a year and as local police forces are clearly completely unable to cope, we really need a far more serious strategy from Government to tackle the spectre of online crime. Will the Minister tell us what more can be done to support local police forces and provide some protection for our constituents?

Mr Wallace: First, that is why we established the joint fraud taskforce, which includes police and crime commissioners, police forces and victims groups, to make sure that we co-ordinate better our response. It is also why the Government have sponsored and supported
the Cyber Aware campaign and Cyber Essentials, to help to make businesses aware of the fraud that awaits them, and banks have sponsored the Take Five campaign. In addition, the national cyber-security strategy sets out a programme in which the Government have invested billions of pounds to make sure that our law enforcement agencies have the capacity to tackle that crime when it is presented to them.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Police have described so-called binary options betting websites that masquerade as investment vehicles as the biggest scam and fraud being perpetrated in the UK. What do the Government intend doing about them?

Mr Wallace: When one of those websites is reported through Action Fraud, our law and order agencies set about trying to make sure we either dismantle it or signpost people away from such areas. In Scotland that is devolved, and it is up to Police Scotland. The broader picture is to make sure that the public and the consumer are aware of what awaits them online, and that they take some very basic steps to protect themselves when they are, for example, Christmas shopping to ensure that fraudsters do not take their money away.

Illegal Migrants

17. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that illegal migrants cannot profit from working in the UK.  

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): In July this year we implemented new powers in the Immigration Act 2016 to prevent migrants from profiting from working illegally, by making that a criminal offence. That ensures that the profits of working illegally can be seized as the proceeds of crime, and assets may be confiscated on conviction.

Nigel Mills: I thank the Minister for that answer and ask him to set out to the House what other measures the Government are taking to ensure that those who are here illegally cannot access UK benefits, such as housing or welfare payments.

Mr Goodwill: I reassure my hon. Friend that adults with no legal status here are not eligible to receive public funds in that way.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Victims of people trafficking tell me that they are often prevented from assisting in criminal prosecutions against individuals from abroad who commit criminal offences because they do not have any access to public funds. What discussions has the Home Office had with the Ministry of Justice concerning providing support to victims of people trafficking?

Mr Goodwill: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that if people who are here illegally have been exploited through modern slavery because they have been trafficked, it is important that we treat them with a degree of compassion and respect, and that we treat them differently from people who are not in that situation.

Leaving the EU: Departmental Staff

19. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What assessment her Department has made of the implications of the UK leaving the EU for (a) the number of and (b) skills required by its staff.  

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Home Office constantly reviews its capabilities in order to deliver the Government’s agenda. Work is under way to understand and respond to the immediate capability impacts as a result of the decision to leave the European Union.

Tom Brake: The Secretary of State has just confirmed that the 3 million EU citizens in the UK will have to be documented. If that processing adds roughly 10% to the Home Office workload, does the Minister accept that it will cost at least £100 million a year and require 3,000 extra staff? If he does not, what is his estimate?

Mr Goodwill: Let me make it clear that people who are here from elsewhere in the EU working legally do not need to receive additional documentation at this time. I reassure them that their status is assured. What happens in the future is a matter for the negotiations, but I make it absolutely clear that no additional documentation is needed at this stage.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): May I make the case to the Minister for updating the systems and the use of computers and information technology in border control—particularly as, with Brexit, we will need to count people in and count people out more effectively—and for investment in our ports, such as the port of Dover?

Mr Goodwill: Certainly, exit checks introduced in 2015 have given us an additional tool to track people as they enter and, in particular, leave the country. New technology, such as e-gates, has helped very much in that regard.

Terrorist Attacks

21. Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that police and security services have the necessary powers to apprehend people planning terrorist attacks in the UK.  

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): The internet presents new opportunities for terrorists, and we must ensure we have the capabilities to confront this challenge. The Investigatory Powers Act 2016 ensures that law enforcement and the security and intelligence agencies have the powers they need in the digital age to disrupt terrorist attacks, subject to strict safeguards and world-leading oversight. The Criminal Finances Bill will add to the ability of UK law enforcement to identify, investigate and disrupt terrorist finance activity.

Sir Simon Burns: Does my hon. Friend agree that the passing of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 is important for ensuring that our security services and law enforcement agencies are able to combat those who wish to do us harm?
Mr Wallace: Yes, it is. It is also important to recognise that it is all very well the agencies having the capability, but they must also have the capacity. That is why, over the next five years, the Government are making an extra £2.5 billion available to the security agencies. We will use that to strengthen our counter-terrorism network abroad and at home.

23. [907638] John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm how much the Government are investing to boost the United Kingdom’s capability to respond quickly to a firearms attack, particularly in the light of what has happened on the continent?

Mr Wallace: Overall counter-terrorism and police spending has been protected in real terms against the 2015-16 baseline over the spending review period. Following the recent European attacks, we revised our risk assessments and are delivering an uplift in our specialist response capability, which includes a £144 million programme over the next five years to uplift our armed policing so that we can respond more quickly and effectively to a firearms attack.

Mr Speaker: We are past 3.15, but that has never bothered me, and it would be unkind to the point of cruelty to exclude the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), from whom the House will wish to hear.

Violence against Women and Girls

22. Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to tackle violence against women and girls. [907637]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): In March, we published the new violence against women and girls strategy, which sets out an ambitious programme of reform, supported by increased funding of £80 million, to make tackling these crimes everybody’s business, to ensure that victims get the support they need and to bring more perpetrators to justice. We have also introduced a new domestic abuse offence to capture coercive control, and consulted on new measures to protect victims of stalking.

Michelle Donelan: As a trustee of Helping Victims of Domestic Violence, a local domestic abuse charity in my constituency, I have seen at first hand just how worrying domestic abuse and sexual offences can be. Will the Minister meet me and the police and crime commissioner in my constituency to see what more we can do together?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the voluntary sector organisations that do so much to support victims. I would be delighted to meet her and the police and crime commissioner for her constituency to see what more we can do to support those victims.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Does the Minister share my concern that Survivors Hull and East Riding, which has supported local victims of sexual trauma for more than two decades, is about to close because of a lack of funding? Would she be willing to meet me to discuss what more resources can go into providing a service locally for those victims?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady is right to raise that case. I am horrified to hear of such a valued service facing that situation. I would be very pleased to meet her to see what we can do to access funding.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): There were 18,000 domestic violence offences against women in the last year in Leeds alone, so there are still far too many. Does the Minister agree that we need to do more to educate boys and men about this crime so that that figure comes down considerably?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point about the important role that men can play and the importance of educating young people about appropriate sexual relationships. He will be pleased to know that world-class resources are available to do that not only from the Home Office, but from the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre. More such work is going on in schools than ever before.

Topical Questions

T1. [907654] Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): To mark the UN’s 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, it is vital that we work together across Government and across political parties to do all that we can to end violence against women and girls. As I made clear at the College of Policing conference last week, protecting vulnerable people is one of my top priorities. As the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) said, we must include men in that as well. Last week, I hosted an event with ministerial colleagues, campaign groups and survivors to raise awareness of and demonstrate my commitment to ending female genital mutilation within a generation. This Conservative Government will continue to take steps to achieve our ambition that no woman should live in fear of abuse, and that every girl should grow up feeling safe and protected.

Fiona Mactaggart: Despite those good intentions, twice as many women report rape now than four years ago, and the proportion of reports that lead to successful prosecutions has gone down. In my constituency, I speak to women who have been raped and had to wait up to 20 months for specialist counselling. When will the Home Secretary improve the care for victims of violence?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Lady will be aware that we encourage the reporting of crime, particularly rape. We want people to have the confidence to do that and to know they will be treated well. We absolutely recognise the need for funding to support people, which is why the new violence against women and girls strategy has been launched, and we have pledged an increase of £80 million to 2020 to make sure we do just that.

T2. [907658] Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The Waveney domestic violence forum is concerned that judges are requiring it to admit to its caring dads programme violent fathers who are uninterested and show no remorse. It is finding it difficult to run these programmes when
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I appreciate the concerns of the Waveney domestic violence forum. I can assure him that I am working closely with the Secretary of State for Justice to improve the family justice response to domestic abuse, and with the judiciary to consider what additional protections might be necessary. We are also supporting innovative pilots, working with perpetrators of domestic abuse, which include disruption as well as support.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The worrying rise in post-referendum hate crime, which we all condemn, has disproportionately affected women—we have seen hijabs ripped off girls, death threats to Gina Miller and family, and the tweet at the weekend about wanting to “Jo Cox” the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). Thankfully the instigator of the tweet has now been charged. Are the Government, after years of inactivity towards social media platforms, embarrassed by this burgeoning abuse of women on and offline? Is it not another aspect of Brexit for which they clearly had no plan?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady is right to raise these horrendous crimes, which have no place in our society; but she is wrong to say that we have been sitting on our hands. We have introduced not only the hate crime strategy but a whole series of offences, for which I am pleased to see the police successfully prosecuting people.

We have also done groundbreaking work with the internet industry, which is taking seriously its responsibility to take down dreadful incidents of online hate crime.

T3. [907657] Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): As I am sure the Minister will be aware, Sutton is a low-crime London borough—I commend the excellent work that the local police force does to keep it so—but in the past few weeks there have been three serious assaults on our high street, including two involving knives. What more can the Government do to tackle knife crime in London boroughs and places such as Sutton?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is right to raise this serious situation. I commend him and the Metropolitan police which, along with other police forces, has been working on Operation Sceptre, which includes knife sweeps. I recommend that he speaks to the head of Sutton Borough Council to see if they are interested in working with the Institute of Community Safety to undertake an area review and make sure that everything is being done to stop this dreadful crime.

T4. [907658] Mr Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): Last Thursday, I met Jenny Hockley, a 70-year-old retired sociology lecturer who was, extraordinarily, arrested on 17 November as part of a council-directed dawn raid to chop down six trees on her street, with the assistance of 12 officers from South Yorkshire police against—it now turns out—the views of the local police and crime commissioner. What assurances can the Home Secretary give the House that in future councils do not drag police officers into such absurd, draconian initiatives?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue. It is a local matter, of course, but it sounds like that important balance we tread between peaceful protest and responding to the law might have been handled in a rather tricky way in his constituency.

I would always urge that peaceful protest is allowed, but I wonder sometimes whether police forces strike the right balance, as in the example he has given.

T5. [907659] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend’s predecessor wisely introduced a two-year visitor visa for China. What plans does she have to extend that to countries that are developing and are our key business partners, such as India?

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): As was made clear during the Prime Minister’s recent and very successful visit to India, it is one of our largest visa markets, and we continue to make improvements to the visa service by expanding our priority services, including new products, and expanding our reach of visa application centres across India. There continue to be large numbers of visa applications from India. Indeed, the latest figures we have, for last year, show that 385,000 Indian nationals visited the UK—an increase of 6% year on year.

T7. [907661] Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): The chief constable of Northumbria police has dismissed the idea that Britain’s exit from the EU would lead to a reduction in the number of foreign criminals operating in the UK. Under the Government’s soft Brexit, do they intend to retain their participation in the European arrest warrant framework?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that it is not appropriate for us to outline our negotiations as they are ongoing. I will say, however, that, as both the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have clearly outlined, we put security first, and the security and safety of our citizens is paramount for this Government.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): A fire at an illegal waste site in Slitting Mill caused weeks of distress for local residents, and significant cost to Staffordshire fire and rescue. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss what additional changes to the law can be made to prevent such instances, as well as how the costs incurred by the fire service can be recovered from the site operators?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend has previously raised this issue with me on behalf of her area’s fire service. I appreciate that what the fire service had to deal with was really challenging. Balancing out the best way to deal with the problem itself incurs costs, so I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss it.

T8. [907662] Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Why do the Government have no data at all on what happens to victims of human trafficking after they exit
Government-funded shelters, or about how many go back to their traffickers? The all-party group specifically raised this matter in a report five years ago, and the Government promised to respond. Will the Secretary of State tell us what the Department has done?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue; we are pressing to do exactly that. I have spoken to Kevin Hyland, the independent commissioner, about this subject, and I have had a roundtable on working with commissioners and the police force to ensure that the police not only press charges, but collect the information from the victims of modern slavery, so that we can make sure that investigations can lead to convictions. I share the hon. Lady’s views.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Why has the Home Office blocked three Iraqi Syrian bishops from coming to the UK to consecrate the first Syriac Orthodox church? Is it not at least disrespectful and probably shameful that they have been given the reason that they do not have enough money or that they might not leave the UK at a time when we should be showing solidarity with Church leaders at the frontline of persecution?

Mr Goodwill: It would not be appropriate for me to comment on individual cases, but let me say that all these applications are considered on their individual merits, in line with UK immigration rules and guidance. There is no policy of denying entry clearance for visas from Syrian nationals.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): In the first nine months of this year, there were almost 600 assaults on police officers in the West Midlands police force alone. Will the Minister meet me, representatives of the Police Federation and my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) to discuss the growing problem of assaults on emergency service workers?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the debates we have had in the Chamber and elsewhere about this issue. It is completely unacceptable to see any kind of assault on a police officer, and that is an aggravating factor. We are working with the Ministry of Justice and are in contact with the Sentencing Council, which is independent, on this issue. I shall meet the Police Federation in the next few days.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I welcome the recently announced Home Office measures on police competence to investigate sexual offences. Will the Home Secretary accept from me that it is time for the police service, and particularly the Met police, to take a serious look at their respective detective training regimes, which I suggest are at the core of the unfortunate publicity?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Home Secretary outlined last week the importance we place on this issue. It is important, as we saw with the Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary inspection, that the Met police takes the opportunity to get to grips with training to ensure that its teams are properly trained to deal with these delicate issues.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): If the refugee family reunion section of UK immigration rules was widened, many refugee children could arrive directly from the conflict region rather than via Calais. Will the Home Secretary commit to look again at these rules so that children do not have to risk their lives to be with their families?

Amber Rudd: We are constantly looking at our immigration rules to ensure that we have the right balance to support vulnerable children on the continent—most of them coming from Calais—whom we are trying to help, but we have other programmes that enable us to give direct help to vulnerable children who are out in the conflict regions.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): As the Home Secretary knows, those of us with coastal constituencies in the south of England are feeling particularly vulnerable to the activities of people traffickers who are bringing illegal immigrants across in private boats. What measures have been taken since the review of small ports and airports that was promised by the previous intelligence Minister?

Amber Rudd: I share my hon. Friend’s view that we need to be constantly vigilant in case people traffickers are trying to get ahead of us, and if they fall between the cracks of our security and ply their evil trade. We have launched a number of initiatives, including Operation Kraken, which enables us to work closely with voluntary and private sector groups along the coast to ensure that any incidents are reported.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Government seem determined to place restrictions on freedom of movement at the heart of Brexit, but the horticultural sector is heavily dependent on 80,000 workers a year coming from the European Union to work. Will the Government commit themselves to ensuring that Brexit, whatever form it takes, will not leave the industry in the lurch, and that it will continue to get the workers it needs?

Mr Goodwill: The result of the referendum made it clear that we need to control the number of people coming from the European Union, and the negotiations will take that and other matters into account.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Past waves of immigration have proved successful because of the integration of new communities into existing ones. The report by Louise Casey has not yet been published, but it has been said that it suggests a form of cultural separatism in the Islamic community. Is that true and, if so, will we be responding to the report in an appropriately thoughtful way?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend’s question gives me an opportunity to thank Louise Casey for her report, and to say to him and the House that we will of course study it carefully to learn better how to improve integration in our communities.

Mr Speaker: I trust that we shall be hearing about it in the House before very long. In fact, I think I can say that with complete certainty.
Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): What steps are the Government taking to identify and address criminal activity associated with Scottish limited partnerships?

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): That question has been raised by other SNP Members during the passage of the Criminal Finances Bill. I shall be meeting them shortly to discuss it, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has agreed to conduct a review.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. These chaps have already spoken. I think I will call Alison Thewliss.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker; that is very generous of you.

I am currently dealing with two ongoing constituency cases that have been caused entirely by incompetence on the part of VFS Global. One of them involves a granny who is stuck in Iran and cannot go to Scotland to see her daughter and newly born granddaughter in Glasgow because of the ludicrous booking system for visa appointments. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me to discuss the issue?

Mr Goodwill: As the Immigration Minister, I should be delighted to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that specific issue.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Will the Home Secretary indulge my obsession? Will she tell me what plans she has after Brexit to redesign our passports after Brexit—and will they be blue-black?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution to this vital debate, and I look forward to further discussions with him about the best way to handle it.

Mr Speaker: That is very reassuring.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): A person has been convicted and will spend the rest of his life in prison for the murder of four young men. Is the Home Secretary aware of that murder, and is she aware that if the police in London had acted differently, two of those lives might well have been saved? It is unfortunate, to say the least, that the Met, when investigating murder, seems on occasions to model itself on Inspector Clouseau.

Brandon Lewis: I shall be happy to look into the specifics of the case but, as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, I cannot comment on them here. Obviously the Metropolitan police are out there every day investigating and preventing crime for the benefit of London.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Will the Policing Minister assure me that, when the review of the formula for policing allocations is conducted, the needs of rural constabularies such as Wiltshire will be properly considered?

Brandon Lewis: I can say to my hon. Friend that, in the funding formula review, we are looking at all aspects. Rural forces are feeding directly into that. I am aware of the issues that they are raising. We will look at that and feed back on it as we go through the review.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Many Russian nationals who were involved in the murder of Sergei Magnitsky and the corruption that he unveiled have harboured their assets in the UK. An opportunity to deal with that issue has been provided by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and 27 other Members in the form of an amendment to the Criminal Finances Bill. Will the Government now support that so that we can keep Russian corruption out of London?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. I met his colleagues and my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab) to discuss that matter. The Department is looking at the amendment as tabled. We already have a number of powers to deal with people who have been accused in this area. However, we will look at the amendment and reflect on it. We will get back to Members on Report.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am sure that Ministers will want to join me in welcoming the first Syrian family to arrive in my constituency under the community sponsorship scheme and to congratulate St Monica’s parishioners, who are providing support to the family, but will Ministers also look at the wider funding and commissioning arrangements across all Greater Manchester local authorities for the support of asylum seekers and refugees to ensure that we can look after all these people properly?

Amber Rudd: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating her constituents on welcoming the family. I also congratulate all the community groups who have generously stepped forward to welcome families. Often those families need a lot of assistance—for example, help with their children, with translation and with learning the English language. Having community support around them is so helpful. Of course, I will keep the support under review.
NEW MEMBER

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

Sarah Jane Olney, for Richmond Park.

Southern Rail

3.38 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on Southern rail.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): Performance on the Southern network has been affected by a combination of factors over the previous months. Those have included trade union action, infrastructure reliability and operator issues. The unions have stepped up their industrial action in the run-up to Christmas, additionally co-ordinating it with action on the underground network.

Let me be clear: this strike action is politically motivated and has affected passengers for far too long. Union leaders have even described the action as “carrying on Fidel’s work.” That will be of no comfort to passengers who just want to get to work.

I have a letter in my folder to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) from the director of railway safety at the Office of Rail and Road. Responding to the safety concern from the unions, Ian Prosser says “DOO is safe.” The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and ASLEF should not be misleading the public about their dispute with Govia Thameslink Railway. Once again I can assure the hard-working staff of the GTR franchise that no train staff are losing pay and no one is losing their job.

Passengers want and deserve improvements, which is why in September the Secretary of State appointed Chris Gibb, a leading railway professional, to work with the operator and with Network Rail to identify areas in which performance on the network can be improved quickly. Some of these £20 million interventions are under way and would be making a significant difference by now, were it not for the fact that owing to continued industrial action by the RMT and now planned action by ASLEF, Southern rail services are to be subject to further delays and alterations now and over the coming weeks.

In recognition of the disruption to services this year, the Secretary of State announced on 2 December a refund package that will compensate season ticket holders with a package equivalent to one free month in acknowledgment of the exceptional issues experienced this year. He also announced that GTR will be the first franchise to introduce Delay Repay 15, starting on 11 December. Compensation alone is not enough, however. We have to restore a timely, reliable and predictable train service. That is why the work of Mr Gibb is focusing on reducing the network rail faults, and why we have new safe driver-only operation trains that can cope with the volume of people wanting to use them. It is why I will continue to ensure that the management of the train operating company is doing everything in its power to run improved services. But we also need the union leaders to stop their needless, unreasonable, disproportionate and politically motivated strikes.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the Minister for his reply. I am putting this question today with the support of Members from right across the House. On Friday, we heard that Southern rail services were to be severely
disrupted every day from tomorrow until further notice. However, that grim warning of imminent service collapse comes after more than two years of rail chaos, which started long before any strike action began. Back in May 2015, the then rail Minister said that our services were “flashing red” in her Department. Eighteen months on, my constituents are regularly in tears of anger and frustration, jobs are being lost, relationships are being broken up and the economy is being seriously damaged. This situation is intolerable, and the Government cannot simply wash their hands of any involvement. Will the Minister roll up his sleeves and get stuck into resolving the crisis? The Transport Select Committee has called for all parties involved to sit down together and resolve the dispute, so will he convene a meeting with the unions and GTR to work this out and restore reliability to this vital public service? In so doing, he would be showing that he is not prepared to allow this crucial piece of infrastructure simply to collapse.

To end the stalemate, will the Department take charge of this contract in the open and strip GTR of the franchise and bring it back in house? That would at least increase the transparency around what is going on. When, for example, will a concrete timetable for GTR to publicly report its performance be revealed? Will performance data be published daily or weekly, and where will they be published? This contract and information about it are shrouded in secrecy, and it is time to make it accountable. Will the Minister answer the outstanding questions on the force majeure application from GTR? Will he provide urgent clarity about whether GTR is in default? The Transport Committee called for a decision on whether GTR was in default by early November 2016. It is now December. Why has the Minister not answered on time?

I do not think the Minister has any idea of the pain that passengers and businesses in Brighton and beyond are suffering. If he did, he would be doing more about it. We have a catastrophic stalemate. What exactly is he going to do about it? My constituents in Brighton want to hear that he is going to get involved. Anything else is not enough.

Paul Maynard: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s urgent question. The best thing she can do on behalf of her constituents is to go and speak to her close friends in the RMT and tell them to call off their disproportionate and unreasonable industrial action. That is the best contribution she can make.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Thank you for calling me during this urgent question, Mr Speaker, which is important because it is about not only the Brighton main line, but communities in my area. Students trying to get to school from Edenbridge on the Redhill to Tonbridge line and people trying to get to work on the Uckfield line have endured misery. This is about the unions, but the nationalised Network Rail has also failed us again and again. Will the Minister please get on with sorting out that organisation, too?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend is entirely right to point out the impact on his constituents in Kent. I travelled to Sevenoaks today through London Bridge and saw some delays. The only long-term solution for this overburdened part of the network is for both Network Rail and the train operating companies to align the incentives and work together to fix the underlying problems that plague the network.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): That this House is still having to address the abysmal service provided by Southern after a year and a half of sub-standard service is testimony to both Southern’s incompetence and the extent to which the Government are committed to privatised rail, even when franchises have become so deeply dysfunctional that they are unable to provide a decent public service. GTR should have been stripped of its franchise long ago for failing to plan properly to take on the franchise, as it has admitted, and for providing what is by far the country’s worst rail service. Hon. Members whose constituents rely on Southern will be well aware of stories of passengers fainting on overcrowded trains, jobs being jeopardised by repeated lateness and parents having to say goodnight to their children from a delayed train.

The Government have defended Southern to the hilt, excusing all its failings as the consequences of an easily avoidable, resolvable industrial dispute, allowing the cancellation of hundreds of services a week and repeatedly throwing taxpayers’ money at the problem as a sticking plaster on an irredeemably dysfunctional concession franchise. The Minister mentioned Mr Gibb, but why did we not hear about Mr Wilkinson, who stood up in Croydon and said that he wants dust-ups with the RMT and to starve staff back to work and to get them out of his railway industry? He is the sort of person the Minister ought to be talking about.

On Friday, it was announced that Southern season ticket holders would be eligible to receive compensation equivalent to one month’s travel. Yet more taxpayers’ money is being spent on the service following the £20 million committed to Southern just a few months ago. The compensation will apply to some 84,000 passengers, but Southern is responsible for 620,000 passenger journeys a day. While any amount of compensation for passengers is welcome, will the Minister take this opportunity to acknowledge that the measures announced on Friday will not come close to compensating the majority of passengers who have suffered from Southern’s abysmal services for the past year and a half? Considering the 1.8% fare rise scheduled for the start of next year, the few commuters who receive compensation will see it wiped out by inflation-busting fares. Sadly, a decent rail service—

Hon. Members: Sit down!

Mr Speaker: Order. I know how to deal with such matters. Members are taking too long. The Minister finished just in time, but I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman exceeded his time. We must establish a discipline that if it is two minutes, that means two minutes or under, not two minutes, two and half minutes or three minutes. I am sorry, but we have to stick to those procedures.

Paul Maynard: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman is so opposed to the idea of compensating Southern’s passengers, but he is right about one thing: the dispute is entirely resolvable. It is resolvable because the RMT
should recognise that the current mode of operation is safe and call off the strikes. ASLEF can also call off the strikes. We could then get on with improving the network.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am pleased to hear the Minister say that no GTR staff will lose their jobs, but that is not the case for my constituents, some of whom have been sacked for being late. The balance of rights and responsibilities in our society is somewhat off if some people trying to improve their terms and conditions is costing other citizens their jobs.

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend is entirely right to point out the grossly disproportionate nature of this industrial action and that communities across the GTR network are experiencing a poorer quality of life because of this unwarranted industrial action.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The overall situation for passengers—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The shadow Secretary of State must take some sort of soothing medicament, which will have the effect of calming him. He will be aware that I suggested to one of his north-east colleagues some time ago that it might be advisable to take up yoga, because it would have a therapeutic effect.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Or yogurt.

Mr Speaker: Or even yogurt.

Mrs Ellman: The overall situation for passengers, caused by a variety of reasons, is intolerable, yet GTR is receiving £1 billion a year in fees and the Department is exposed to £38 million of lost revenue. What can the Department do to resolve this situation?

Paul Maynard: Some months ago, as the hon. Lady will be aware, we asked Chris Gibb to look into the operation of the network, the infrastructure and the train operating company. We look forward to receiving his report by the end of the year, which will guide us in the decisions we take in the new year as to how to make rapid, noticeable, identifiable improvements in this network.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The RMT members who are adding to the disruption for all our constituents are also the employees. May we be told how much they earn, how many of them have signed up to the new operating arrangements and quite what issue is preventing the RMT and the operators from reaching agreement and allowing other workers to get to work reliably? I am talking about how students and teachers can get to work, and how old people can visit their relatives. I have here analysis of the feedback from the 1,000 constituents who have been in touch with me about the performance of Southern rail, and it is a catalogue of misery. The failure of Southern rail is affecting my constituents’ work, family life, health and wellbeing, and they have had enough. When will the Minister confirm rail devolution for London, so that Transport for London, which has a proven track record and high levels of customer satisfaction, can run these services? When will my constituents’ Southern rail misery end?

Paul Maynard: I recognise the picture that the hon. Lady paints of the problems her constituents are facing. I hope she will join me in urging all sides in this dispute to return to the negotiating table and reach an agreement that puts the needs of passengers first, not the interests of the rail unions.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I apologise for my interjection earlier, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) was absolutely right to say that the price for the RMT’s self-indulgent, politically motivated strike action is being paid in jobs by people, particularly young people, who are trying to get to work. This action is neanderthal, its day has well gone and that strike must end. Will the Minister confirm that the train operating companies will be able to take greater control of the works of Network Rail in the future, so that we can solve some of the structural problems?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for his great courtesy. May I gently tell him that I now realise why, 20 years ago, he was affectionately described to me by a very near constituency neighbour of his as “peppery”.

Paul Maynard: I entirely recognise that the service today has been disappointing, because of a broken rail between East Croydon and Gatwick, but, as the hon. Gentleman points out, this is happening far too often on non-strike days. I expect both GTR and Network Rail to address these underlying performance issues, but they can do that only if they are not also faced with unwarranted, unjustifiable industrial action.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My constituents who commute regularly look at the Southern rail situation with horror. What assurances can the Minister give them that such action by the unions could not spread to other areas, particularly given that we are renegotiating the South West Trains contract?

Paul Maynard: I recognise my right hon. Friend’s concern. All I can say to her is that I expect all train operating companies across the country to do their utmost to ensure that they run a timely, efficient, reliable and punctual service. I hope that will be the case with whoever emerges from the franchise competition for South West Trains.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I have here analysis of the feedback from the 1,000 constituents who have been in touch with me about the performance of Southern rail, and it is a catalogue of misery. The failure of Southern rail is affecting my constituents’ work, family life, health and wellbeing, and they have had enough. When will the Minister confirm rail devolution for London, so that Transport for London, which has a proven track record and high levels of customer satisfaction, can run these services? When will my constituents’ Southern rail misery end?

Paul Maynard: I recognise the picture that the hon. Lady paints of the problems her constituents are facing. I hope she will join me in urging all sides in this dispute to return to the negotiating table and reach an agreement that puts the needs of passengers first, not the interests of the rail unions.
Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend has clearly been paying attention to the weekend press. I should perhaps observe that the Secretary of State will make a speech on this issue tomorrow evening. He may therefore wish to pay close attention to the following day’s papers as well to learn more about what might be announced.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I know that it suits some to blame all the current problems with this line on the rail unions, but let us be clear: my constituents have been putting up with a disgraceful and shabby service for the best part of two years now. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) asked about TfL, which has better satisfaction rates and provides better services. We want this company, GTR, to be stripped of the franchise and the franchise to be transferred to TfL as soon as possible. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government still intend to facilitate that? We do not want to wait until 2021: get on and do it now.

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman is certainly right to identify the problems on the network, but they can be solved only if we are not facing industrial action on the network, day in, day out, which makes it impossible for those who wish to deal with Network Rail, GTR and other train operating companies to address the problems.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): Can the Minister clarify whether, in his view, the intolerable conditions for commuters in my constituency are caused more by a firm that has not been well run for some time, or by the unacceptable union practices, which have been rendered all the more disgraceful at Christmas time?

Paul Maynard: That is an important point. It was noticeable that the RMT adjusted its strike days because of the public outrage over the strikes that were occurring in the immediate run-up to Christmas. I urge it to go one step further and call off its strike altogether and get back round the negotiating table.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Coincidentally, I delivered a petition to No. 10 Downing Street this morning, calling for Southern to be sacked. Will the Minister acknowledge that it is not just the unacceptable and pointless union action that is causing chaos on the network, but repeated Network Rail equipment failure, repeated train failures, which are Southern’s fault, and a shortage of drivers, which is Southern’s fault. When will the Minister step in and take control away from the failing company, pass responsibility to Transport for London, which the Liberal Democrats called for as far back as 1999, and ensure that passengers are provided with much more generous compensation?

Paul Maynard: The right hon. Gentleman’s analysis of the multiple causes is correct, but what he does not fully appreciate is that the need to focus on Network Rail as a source of many of the delays means that we must have full, rapid and ready access to the track day in, day out. We cannot do that against a backdrop of continual industrial action, which makes it harder to maintain the railways.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I have long campaigned for compensation, so may I thank the Minister for the welcome step towards it today? On the Horsham line, we have a huge number of trains being cancelled or delayed as a result of failures with onboard cameras—cameras that seem to work well elsewhere. May I urge him to get GTR to get a grip on this? Either there is a technical fault, or some other issue is causing interference.

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend deserves particular credit for the assiduous nature of his campaign for improved compensation for Southern passengers. I am glad to hear that he welcomed last Friday’s announcement. I understand that the level of faults on the driver-only operation trains to Horsham are running at almost double what is usually expected on the route. GTR is looking into the matter further. I am hoping to hear more from it in due course, and I will write to him with the outcome of that investigation.

Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I started commuting—both regularly and frequently—from Forest Hill to London Bridge and Waterloo East in 1963. In all those 53 years, the service has never been as unreliable and as chaotic as it is today. I now no longer use Southern to go to London Bridge, as I use the overground service. Unfortunately, large parts of my constituency, and just about every other constituency of Members concerned about this matter, do not have that option. Many of my constituents blame the management for what is going on, and an equal number blame the unions. Another set blames Network Rail and the infrastructure. We have heard from the Minister today about track failures causing chaos on the Brighton line. When will he and the Government do something to reassure my constituents, and those of everybody in this Chamber, that the Government are actually trying to do the best they can for commuters, rather than leaving commuters to the fate of the most incompetent organisation in the entire UK rail industry?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has given new meaning to the description “delayed journey” and we are deeply grateful to him.

Paul Maynard: As Members will be aware, Chris Gibb is an experienced railwayman with a deep understanding of the industry and of that network. His report will look at all the issues that the hon. Gentleman has just raised. We look forward to receiving it and deciding the most appropriate action we can take to deliver the improvements that not only he but all of us in the Chamber are impatient to see.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Given that from tomorrow two of my towns, Seaford and Newhaven, will see their rail service cease to exist once again and instead have bus replacement services, and that from next week 14 of the stations in my constituency will see no rail service at all for nine days out of 14, the Government response is just not good enough. They need to intervene between the unions and Southern rail and get this sorted.

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend has never been anything less than assiduous in campaigning on behalf of Lewes, Seaford and Newhaven and their rail services, but the diminution in service to her constituency is due to an ASLEF threat of strike action against something that its members have been doing for many, many months—30%
of our commuter network is driver-controlled operation. ASLEF has been operating this system for many, many months on the new class 700s, yet its members are now striking against precisely what they have been doing. That, also, is disproportionate and unreasonable.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): Commuters in Croydon and elsewhere have suffered enough, and after two years of rail chaos they certainly should not be expected to pay any more for the services they use, so will the Minister now show that he recognises the extent of the failure and rule out any fare rises on Southern rail services next year?

Paul Maynard: We have been very clear that we are going to cap rail fare increases on regulated fares at retail prices index plus zero, but to recognise the impact on Southern passengers we announced last Friday a compensation package that equates to one month’s free travel for annual season ticket holders. In addition, as I said earlier, we will be introducing Delay Repay 15 early on the GTR network from 11 December.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Our constituents in Sussex are at their wits’ end. We are at our wits’ end. Notwithstanding the chaos being caused by these completely unjustified strikes, last week's announcement on compensation was a good start, but only a start, and it was taken away with the other hand by the price rises that went with it. When can we have a proper, transparent penalty system where GTR pays penalties every time its trains are late, cancelled or delayed, and that is set against the price rises without the commuters having to go through a bureaucratic claim process? GTR needs to sort this out urgently.

Paul Maynard: I recognise my hon. Friend’s concern to make sure that automatic compensation for Delay Repay is broadened as fast as it can be. We need to ensure that the system works, and works well. We need to ensure that the system works, and works well. We need to ensure that passengers are on the trains that they say they were on that were delayed, so we need a technological solution. I am keen to improve the operation of Delay Repay 15 and GTR will be the first rail company that we try it out on.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Residents in Croydon have been suffering from the terrible service for many months now. Does the Minister agree that this is partly due to track and infrastructure failings, partly due to GTR’s incompetence, and partly due to the intransigence of the RMT? Will he commit to spending money on fixing the points and signals and, if the RMT cannot be prevailed upon to call off this needless strike, will he consider legislating to ban such strike action on critical public infrastructure?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend is right to identify the fact that the line will need investment, not just the £20 million that we have already put in, which will support the work of Chris Gibb, but the money to ensure that one of the most overburdened parts of our network is able to properly meet the needs of those who rely on it to get to work, to school and to all the other activities that life depends on in the south-east.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I, too, thank the Minister for the start in terms of compensation for all those who suffer this intolerable situation across the network every day, including all those using the route across to Southampton airport, often travelling to Gatwick airport from Swanwick. Will the Minister confirm that he is looking at the broad-ranging harm caused by these disproportionate, political strikes, which are affecting regional airports as well as local businesses?

Paul Maynard: I always recognise the importance of Southampton Airport Parkway in the overall network, both for South West Trains and on the Southern network too. I am always happy to meet individual colleagues with particular concerns, and I will be more than happy to discuss Southampton airport’s needs with my hon. Friend further.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I have the misfortune of having the misery line run through my constituency of Wealden. I welcome the Government’s move to one-month compensation. It is now time for the unions to show similar boldness and call off the strikes. However, the timetable is not worth the paper it is written on. What more can the Minister do to get GTR management to get a grip and start running a service that does not require compensation from the Government because it is so appalling?

Paul Maynard: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s involvement over recent weeks; she has been a staunch advocate for the people of Uckfield, who indeed suffer from an inadequate railway line. The most important thing at this stage is for the unions to call off their industrial action and for both GTR and Network Rail to be allowed to focus on what really matters: ensuring that we have a reliable, timely and punctual railway network.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Residents in Sutton want to get rid of this horrendous performance, which has been exacerbated by the unions, so that they can get back to merely poor performance and so that the underlying issues of rail, rolling stock and more drivers can start to be tackled. I welcome the compensation, but what about the passengers who pay-as-you-go using the Oyster card? What can they expect in return?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend is right to point out that even in inner suburban London, people are equally reliant on Southern rail. They will also be eligible for season ticket reductions, should they have annual, quarterly or weekly tickets, as well as Delay Repay 15 compensation from 11 December. That, to me, underlines the importance of ensuring that the network functions well for everybody, wherever they live on the Southern network.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The Minister has rightly referred to a letter that I received from the director of rail safety, specifying that this form of technology is not only safe but has been properly tested by Southern as safe. Given that the unions continue to use safety as the cloak for this dispute, will the Minister consider using legislation to stop unions striking on grounds of safety when the industry regulator has deemed the relevant issue to be safe?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend has done the country a great service during his time on the Transport Committee in trying to nail the myth that DOO is in some way an
unsafe means of driving trains. The language from the
director of rail safety at the Office of Rail and Road
was abundantly clear and it was examined closely at the
most recent Transport Committee meeting. He could
not have been clearer. It is now for ASLEF and the
RMT to pay heed to his words and call off their
unreasonable and disproportionate strikes.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): State-owned
Network Rail is clearly not fit for purpose; the private
sector train operating companies have weak and ineffectual
management; and the rail unions are organising politically
motivated strikes. If that were happening in local
government, the Government would have sent in their
own commissioners to sort out the organisation. Why
do they not do so in this case?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend is right to point out
the importance of getting track and train operators to
align their incentives and work together to ensure that
they deliver a better service for passengers. The Secretary
of State has made no secret of the fact that he regards
joint working and alliance working as being at the root
of what will bring a better level of service on the
Southern network.

We look forward to making further announcements
on that in due course and to delivering the improved
service that all passengers want, whatever political party
they support and whatever their views on how the
railways should be structured. They want a timely,
reliable and punctual rail service. The RMT and ASLEF
are in the way of that, with their disproportionate and
unreasonable industrial action.

**Children and Social Work Bill [Lords]**

Second Reading

4.10 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): I
beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am delighted to be able to open the debate in the
absence of the Secretary of State, who is in Shanghai
at the education summit. I know she regrets not being
here, and she sends her apologies.

As the Secretary of State made clear when she spoke
at the national children and adult services conference a
few weeks ago, nothing is more important than making
sure that children get the best start in life, feel safe, are
well looked after and are able to fulfil their dreams.
Nowhere is that more important than for those children
who do not have the benefit of a loving family to help
them on their way and to support them as they grow up,
or who face other significant challenges, which make it
harder for them to flourish and thrive.

Children's social care professionals perform some of
society's most vital, most important work, and we entrust
them with nothing less than keeping our children safe
and making life-changing decisions about what is best
for their futures. These are highly challenging, highly
complex tasks, performed by deeply dedicated and
committed individuals.

However, as we all know, the system in which these
individuals work is far from perfect, meaning the help
and support being offered to vulnerable children in
different parts of the country is a long way from being
consistently excellent. Evidence from Ofsted shows that
most local authorities struggle in some way to provide
consistently effective core social work practice. That is
why this Government are determined to bring about the
widest-reaching reforms to children's social care and
social work for a generation.

Reviews by Professor Eileen Munro, Sir Martin Narey
and Professor David Croisdale-Appleby, among others,
have given us a deep understanding of the challenges
faced by children's social care. They have described a
system in which initial social worker training is not
consistently preparing students for the challenges of the
job, and those already doing it too often lack the time,
specialist skill and supervision needed to achieve real
change for children and families; a system that focuses
too much on management and is governed by prescribed
approaches rather than excellent practice; and a system
where services have not always been designed around
vulnerable children, and innovation has not been given
enough space to thrive.

Over the last six years, the Government have taken
important steps towards addressing these challenges.
For example, we have raised standards in children's
homes and enabled young people in foster care to
remain with their carer up to the age of 21. We have
invested £100 million through our innovation programme
to allow radical new approaches to children's social care
to be developed and tested. In April, we announced a
£200 million extension to the programme to take this
further still. We have taken a variety of steps to enhance
the status, skills and capacity of the social work
profession—both for children and for adults. Those
include appointing chief social workers; publishing definitive
statements of the knowledge and skills required by
adults’ and children’s social workers; and investing over £750 million since 2010 in traditional and fast-track routes into the profession.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gibb: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I would just like to explain some of the tenets of the Bill, and then I will take his intervention.

We are starting to see things change. This year, we have seen the first “outstanding” judgments under the most recent—and most challenging—Ofsted framework. Local authorities are testing innovative ways of supporting families through the children’s social care innovation programme. Examples of excellent leadership across the country are being celebrated by Ofsted and others.

However, we are under no illusion that there is still much more to be done. That is why, in July of this year, the Department for Education published a clear and ambitious vision and plan for the changes that need to be made to drive sustainable improvement across the whole country. This is our plan for putting children first. It sets out fundamental reforms across each of the three pillars on which the social care system stands: people and leadership, practice and systems, and governance and accountability. This Bill is a crucial part of delivering reforms across those three pillars.

Part 1 concerns children who are in care or supported by the state. Clause 1 sets out, for the first time, a set of corporate parenting principles designed to establish consistently high standards in the support of looked-after children and care leavers, and drive a culture of excellent corporate parenting. The principles are intended to help a local authority to think and act in the interests of the children in their care in the same way as any good parent would. This is not about putting a new set of duties on local authorities; it is about changing behaviour and practice. The aim is to ensure that all parts and every tier of local government have the needs and circumstances of looked-after children and care leavers in their minds in their planning and decisions. This responsibility goes beyond just children’s social care, reaching across the whole of the local authority.

Clause 2 will ensure that the corporate parenting ethos extends into adulthood and that all care leavers are clear about the support on offer to them and how to access it. Care leavers will have access to information about the services available to them through a local offer from their local authority, with each local offer based on consultation with care leavers themselves.

Clause 3 will give all care leavers access to support from a personal adviser at any point up to the age of 25. We amended the Bill in another place to make sure that the service is offered at least annually so that care leavers can take advantage of it whenever they need to.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Gibb: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I wish to explain some of the tenets of the Bill.

The next section of the Bill recognises that children who are adopted or who leave care under another permanence order often have ongoing difficulties resulting from their early life experiences. Clauses 4 to 7 will therefore give them access to the same support that looked-after children receive from virtual school heads at local authority level, and that designated teachers provide in schools to help with their education. Following an undertaking given in the other place, we are bringing forward amendments that will extend these provisions to children who have been adopted from overseas.

Clauses 8 and 9 expand the factors that courts and local authorities must take into account when deciding on the most appropriate place for a child. They do not give priority to one type of placement over another, but they do place more emphasis on stability and what would be in a child’s best long-term interests, taking account of the impact of any harm that the child may have suffered.

Jonathan Reynolds: rose—

Mr Gibb: I now give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am extremely grateful to the Minister. I was trying to tell him that I have to speak in a Delegated Legislation Committee at half-past 4, so the clock was ticking down for me. I want to ask him about a specific point relating to some casework that I have done in my constituency. It is about the lack of safeguarding checks for 16 and 17-year-olds in private fostering arrangements. I had a situation where a young person within that age group in my constituency went into a private fostering arrangement, and the parents were unable to get the assurances they would have had in a public setting. That is not addressed in the Bill, and I wonder whether the Minister would be willing to look at it if I tabled an amendment at a later stage.

Mr Gibb: Yes, of course. My hon. Friend the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families is very keen to engage in debate on the details in Committee. I know that he will be very interested in the particular case raised by the hon. Gentleman and want to debate it with him.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): In Oxfordshire we have had a situation where children in care have been abused, and that has led to Operation Bullfinch. How will what the Minister has set out make that situation better?

Mr Gibb: The local safeguarding arrangements set out in the Bill will provide a strong statutory framework that puts responsibility on the police, the NHS—through the clinical commissioning group—and the local authority to ensure that a robust safeguarding system is in place, but with greater local flexibility than we have at the moment, so that the arrangements are as effective as possible in meeting local needs. I also believe that the combination of improved national arrangements for analysing serious cases, which I will come on to, including child sexual abuse and exploitation, and for learning from them in a more systematic way, including higher standards for social workers, as set out in the Bill, will enable Oxfordshire and other counties across the country to keep children safer than is currently the case.
Chapter 2 of part 1 of the Bill focuses largely on arrangements for the safeguarding and protection of children. Earlier this year, Alan Wood, the former director of children’s services in Hackney who is president of the Association of Directors of Children’s Services, carried out a review for the Government on the role and functions of local safeguarding children boards. His report, which was published in May, found that local arrangements were patchy. Less than half of LSCBs were judged by Ofsted to be good or better, and he reported that there was a clear consensus in favour of reform. Strong partnership is, as we know from serious case reviews, key to keeping children safe.

Clauses 12 to 15 will establish a new child safeguarding practice review panel to review serious child safeguarding cases that are complex or of national importance. The purpose of the panel will be to improve the way in which we learn from cases where a child has died or been seriously harmed and neglect or abuse of the child was known or suspected.

Clauses 16 to 30 will introduce a stronger statutory framework for child safeguarding and protection at local level. The focus will shift away from wide-ranging local partnerships and will place a duty on the three key agencies involved in safeguarding children—namely local authorities, the police and the health service—to work together, and with any relevant agencies, to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

**Tim Loughton rose—**

**Mr Gibb:** I will give way to my hon. Friend and am sorry that I did not do so earlier.

**Tim Loughton:** The Minister will be aware that this is not the original Bill, thanks to the good work of the House of Lords in removing clauses 29 to 33 on the duty to innovate. At the recent national children and adult services conference in Manchester, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said of that duty:

“It’s about how we can put you in the best position to protect those children properly.”

The trouble is that the “you”—meaning 150 organisations, including Coram, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the British Association of Social Workers and 90% of all social workers—said that they did not want it and that they were opposed to it. Will the Minister confirm that he will not try to reintroduce those clauses in this House?

**Mr Gibb:** I listened carefully to my hon. Friend, who will be aware, of course, that Eileen Munro, whom he appointed to look into this whole area when he was the Minister, supported the power to innovate. The Local Government Association, ADCS and Catch22 also support it. The power is not to do with taking rights away from children or with saving money; it is about giving councils the opportunity to develop new ways of working that they believe will improve outcomes for children.

**Mr Gibb:** I know that that issue has been discussed and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families will listen very carefully to my right hon. Friend if she tables such an amendment.

**Dame Caroline Spelman** (Meriden) (Con): Chapter 2 covers other provisions relating to children, so we are talking about the rights of the child. Will the Minister consider amending the law so that a child has the right to have the names of both parents on their marriage registration certificate?

**Mr Gibb:** I know that that issue has been discussed and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families will listen very carefully to my right hon. Friend. We are not introducing change for the sake of change. If existing LSCB arrangements are working, there will be nothing to prevent them from continuing in a similar vein within the new legal framework set out in the Bill. Importantly, the local safeguarding partners will have a clear responsibility for the arrangements and the flexibility to change and improve them if they are not working.

I should briefly mention two other provisions in chapter 2 of the Bill. Clause 11 is largely technical and allows the Government to use their powers to intervene in combined authorities where their services are failing vulnerable children and young people, in the same way as the Government can intervene in individual authorities. Clause 31 was an amendment to the Bill, and it will enable the Secretary of State to extend whistleblower protection to people applying for jobs in children’s social care, as well as to existing employees.

Part 2 sets the legal framework for the establishment of a bespoke regulator for all social workers in England. High-quality social work can transform lives, and social workers play a critical role in our society. Every day, social workers deal with complex and fraught situations that require a great depth of skill, knowledge, understanding and empathy. However, when social workers are not able to fulfil their role competently, the consequences can be grave. In order to protect the public from these risks, social workers have to meet high standards of acceptable practice and competence, which are overseen by a regulator.

The need for an improved system of regulation for the social work profession was highlighted in recent independent reviews by Sir Martin Narey and Professor David Croisdale-Appleby. Our ambition, through the establishment of a new bespoke regulator for social work, is to continue to improve the practice of social work and raise the status of the profession. For too long, the bar on standards has been too low. Some graduates are leaving courses and being registered as social workers without the knowledge and skills required to do the job, and that cannot be right. The new regulator will ensure, following consultation with the profession, that minimum standards are set at the right level. The new regulator will be a separate legal entity, operating independently standing up for vulnerable looked-after children in local authorities. If they go under the proposals, how is that not taking away the rights of children, particularly vulnerable children?

**Mr Gibb:** This is not about abolishing any statutory responsibilities. My hon. Friend should wait to see the amendments tabled in Committee. I am sure that he will want to talk about his concerns in more detail with the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, who will take them very seriously indeed, particularly given my hon. Friend’s background and experience.
of Ministers in its day-to-day work. The Government have always been clear that we have no intention of making decisions about the performance of individual social workers. As with other independent health and social care regulators, the Professional Standards Authority will oversee the operations of Social Work England. The PSA has welcomed the revised clauses.

We are planning to table a further amendment regarding the national assessment and accreditation system. That will introduce a nationally recognised post-qualification specialism in child and family social work, which will reinforce the focus on quality of practice.

There are two other crucial measures that are not in the Bill, but about which amendments will be tabled shortly. First, amendments will be tabled to ensure that looked-after children in England and Wales can legally be accommodated in secure children's homes in Scotland. Recent case law has cast some doubt on the present arrangements. Secondly, amendments will be tabled regarding the power to innovate. That power is a direct response to the issues raised by Eileen Munro in her independent review of child protection. She has said:

“Trusting professionals to use their judgement rather than be forced to follow unnecessary legal rules will help ensure children get the help they need, when they need it. Testing innovation in a controlled way to establish the consequences of the change, before any national roll out, is a sensible and proportionate way forward.”

The purpose of the power is to allow individual local authorities to test new ways of working by changing or disapplying specific legislative provisions within a controlled environment, with a view to achieving better outcomes for children. As hon. Members know, the other place was unhappy about the clauses that were included in the Bill at introduction. We appreciate that this is a new way of working in Government and we understand why some noble Lords were wary, but the provisions are too important just to let them drop. I emphasise that this is a grassroots power, empowering local authorities to test new and better ways of working in the best interests of children.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gibb: If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I am coming to the concluding elements of my comments.

Local government overwhelmingly supports these measures, and the national associations and individual authorities have made it clear that they do not want us to lose this opportunity to allow them to test new ways of working. We have, therefore, reviewed and substantially revised the clauses to make sure that they avoid the issues raised in the other place, and there are several notable new features. We have removed the provision that allowed a body carrying local authority functions under an intervention arrangement to apply to use the power. Only local authorities can apply to use the power and if they do not wish to, that is the end of the matter. The power was never intended to be used to alter or remove children's fundamental rights or entitlements. Its sole purpose is to allow local authorities to trial better and more practical alternatives to the sometimes very specific and overly prescriptive requirements set out in legislation in order to provide better outcomes for children. The new amendments will put that beyond doubt.

We will set out further provision for the process surrounding the power to ensure that it is based on sound consultation, transparency and robust safeguards. All applications to use the power will be subject to local consultation, scrutiny by an independent panel and parliamentary approval. Pilots will be closely monitored. Those changes will be in addition to amendments the Government tabled in the other place about the scrutiny process that accompanies the power—

Mr Lammy: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Mr Gibb: I will not give way to the right hon. Gentleman because he was not here at the beginning of my speech, when I set out a lot of the basic principles surrounding the Bill.

As I said, those changes will be in addition to amendments the Government tabled in the other place about the scrutiny process that accompanies the power and ruling out the use of the provision for profit. The Government are committed to working with the sector. The changes we have made are the result of significant consultation and we believe that these clauses are the safest possible way to test new approaches. My hon. Friend the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families is very keen to meet any colleagues who have concerns to discuss these provisions further.

This is a Bill for the welfare and prospects of vulnerable children and young people. All its measures are designed to improve the services that so many of them rely on, and I commend it to the House.

4.31 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): We welcome any attempt to improve the lives of children in care, and I am sure that aim is shared in all parts of the House. The challenges facing those children are significant, as is the effort needed to tackle them. The National Audit Office said recently:

“Nationally the quality of help and protection for children is unsatisfactory and inconsistent, suggesting systemic rather than just local failure.”

The Government need to take action in the Bill to address that failure, rather than make it worse. I hope that the Secretary of State is listening to this very important debate, even if she is not able to attend the Chamber.

A new report by LaingBuisson for the Department for Education, which was published only last Friday, considered the options of outsourcing and developing markets in children's social services. That is privatisation by another name. Quite simply, it would be not just the wrong solution, but no solution at all.

Following the excellent work of my noble Friends and others in the other place, the clauses that would have allowed local authorities to derogate from their existing legal obligations are no longer in the Bill. However, given the seriousness of the proposals and the timing of that report, I must ask the Secretary of State's Department to think again and guarantee to this House that the Government will not seek to use the Bill as a vehicle to privatise children's social services.

I hope the Minister can give us that assurance later, because there is a good deal to welcome in the Bill. From the principles of corporate parenting to the local offer for care leavers, there are steps towards helping young people in care and leaving care that we welcome.
I do not want to have to divide the House in later stages and the Opposition would like to make progress collectively.

This issue is vital to the collective good of our nations. The services that are provided and the great work that is done on the ground by many public sector workers should be applauded, as they change lives every single day. I must declare an interest as my niece is one such worker. Our aim collectively within the Bill should be to enhance and enable that important work. Privatisation and fragmentation are not the answer. Our overall concern is less with what is in the Bill than with what is not in it. In short, the Bill lacks the ambition to have the meaningful impact on the lives of vulnerable young people that is needed.

If we are to make significant progress, we have to improve child mental health services. The Bill focuses on adoption, which is hardly a surprise—indeed, the past several years, the Government have taken several steps to make it easier to adopt, such as the Education and Adoption Act 2016—and we welcome measures that support adoption, but surely the Minister is aware that only one in every 20 children in care goes on to be adopted, so can he explain to the House why the Bill, much like the last one, focuses exclusively on adoption and does not contain provision for other forms of care? Would this not have been an opportunity to come forward with a comprehensive strategy for children in all forms of care? Will he indicate whether we might anticipate further legislation or whether he thinks that no changes are needed?

Similarly, we welcome the principles of corporate parenting, but there are questions about why the Bill does not go further. I am sure the Minister agrees that children in care will often have complex needs that require a joined-up approach across public services in order to get the best possible outcomes, so will he explain why there is no provision in the Bill to facilitate ways for public services, such as health and education, to play a key role in ensuring good corporate parenting? These public services play a key role in ensuring the best outcomes for children in care, yet there is no apparent involvement for them in the corporate parenting principles.

The principle of the local offer is welcome, and we supported it when it was introduced for children with special educational needs and disabilities in the Children and Families Act 2014, but we have seen failings in practice, with the quality of local offers varying wildly between local authorities, no minimum guarantees of quality, no statutory guidance and no certainty that the local offer will be available to all those who need it. When there are no minimum guarantees of quality, we know which areas will lose out. Overwhelmingly, it will be areas already facing disadvantage that will not get the support they need.

There are already unacceptable variations in spending on children’s services between regions. In one local authority, £4,970 is spent on children in need; in another, it is only £340. The Department for Education’s own figures show that these spending inequalities fall along our all-too-familiar geographical divides.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In my conversations with Hull City Council’s children’s services department, it talks to me about the resource inequalities it faces and the very disadvantaged community it serves. It is not asking for powers to innovate; it is asking for proper resources to provide the services that young people need in the city.

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend makes a significant point. Local authorities in the north-west, such as mine, have faced cuts of 50% since austerity while trying to deal with the complex needs of their communities. I ask the Government to look again at that.

In the south-east, spending tends to be much higher than average, but, as we move through to the Midlands and the north-west, spending in local authorities is far lower. Once again, levels of spending on public services fall on either side of the north-south divide, with the north losing out. In his final report as Her Majesty’s chief inspector of schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw has singled out the north-south divide as one of the great challenges facing our education system and our country, and only this morning the Children’s Commissioner said that the problem was simply that parents in the north were not as ambitious as those in the south. I am sure that the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, a parent from the north himself, will agree that such comments are neither acceptable nor helpful.

In an effort to ensure that all regions of our country, north and south, benefit from the local offer, I hope he will seek to put clear national standards in the Bill that all local offers will have to meet. There is a clear case for proper guidance on what the local offer should contain and how to make it accessible to all those who need it, drawing on the best available practice. Will the Minister tell us why these issues have not been addressed in the Bill, and whether the Government will bring forward amendments during its passage?

Part 2 establishes the new regulator, Social Work England. I want to pay tribute once again to the excellent work done by the parties in the other place. Following their scrutiny, plans to place regulatory control with the Secretary of State were defeated. I am sure that the Minister would acknowledge the norm that regulators, if operationally independent from Government and, in this case, serve the interests of children. Will he guarantee today that that independence will be respected as the Bill is ultimately agreed?

While we welcome the new regulatory body, assuming that it is effective and independent, we will seek answers to a number of questions about how it will function. After all, the Government seem to want Social Work England to have a representative improvement and regulatory roles within the profession, yet they have not told us how it will be achieved. We have no detail on the remit of the work of the new regulator. As it stands, we will find out only through a series of regulations to be made by the Secretary of State. Will the Minister tell us exactly what the remit and powers of the new regulator will be, and why it is appropriate for those to be decided in secondary legislation, away from scrutiny of the full House? After all, we have been down this path before. Only four years ago, the General Social Care Council was closed. What, then, will be done differently this time to ensure that we do not look back in a year or two and see yet another regulator that has been closed down?

We broadly welcome what is in the Bill, although we hope that the Minister will answer some of the many questions that remain. Once already in the other place, the Government’s plans for the outsourcing and
privatisation of our children’s services, dressed up as “innovation”, were defeated. Nobody in the profession believes that privatisation is the answer to the immense challenges it currently faces, and neither can it alleviate the growing demand for children’s services.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is doing a very good job of putting forward the case that exists in the country. Is she concerned that the Minister has not said much at all about what “innovation” he expects would require a local authority, in effect, to wash its hands of its statutory duty in respect of our young people and children?

Angela Rayner: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Most people who work in the profession believe that privatisation is absolutely the wrong answer and will not help with any form of innovation that the Government might currently want. In fact, the best way of helping would be to restore the investment in our community and local services that the Government have cut over the last few years.

I call on the Minister to confirm today that the Government will not seek to bring these clauses back into the Bill. I am sure that he knows as well as Opposition Members and indeed all Members that these plans do not offer a real solution. If the Minister fails to take that suggestion on board, Opposition Members will be far less conciliatory when we debate the Bill again.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): The Bill is a very good one. It has been amended in the House of Lords, and we will need to consider the implications of that in due course. The central points of the Bill are well founded. I am particularly impressed with the theme of reflecting the work of the Munro report and improving the capacity of social workers to use their own judgment, rather than simply rely on box ticking. That is an appropriate theme for the Bill and it explains why the regulatory structure introduced by the Bill will help. It is through such a regulatory system that the ability to make judgments will be made easier.

It is important for social workers to have a clear eye on what professional regulation is all about. The profession should be operating, of course, at arm’s length, which is usefully stressed in the Bill. A register of social workers makes a lot of sense, because one of the things that we must do is enhance professionalism in social work. That is where I have some difference with the Government, in that I think that ultimately we should have a professional body for social workers. The Education Select Committee made it clear in a recent report that it thought there was a strong case for such a body, and I think there is an appetite for that beyond the Chamber. I urge the Government to have an open mind, and I suggest that they continue to send signals that they would like a professional body to be established. I also think that an independent review of proceedings in five years’ time makes a huge amount of sense, because that is a realistic timeframe.

There is, however, one area in which I think the Bill needs some additions, or at least some recognitions. Given that more than 70,000 children are effectively children of the state and that so many more children are subjected to sexual abuse, and given the historical sexual abuse that has taken place, our failure to place the issue of sex and relationships education front and centre is becoming increasingly obvious. The Government must embark on a full consultation to provide reassurance that something will be done about this most important matter. I ask the Minister to confirm that there will be a realistic and meaningful consultation on the introduction of statutory SRE.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has raised that point. May I ask him to back Labour amendments to make SRE part of the safeguarding of all children, so that we can finally ensure that we keep every young person in the country safe?

Neil Carmichael: To an extent, that will depend on what the amendments are, and whether the Government make it clear that they will organise a full consultation. However, I note what the hon. Lady has said, and I am sure that the Government have noted what I have just said. We need a full, meaningful and comprehensive consultation on this important matter.

Five Select Committee Chairs sent a letter to the Secretary of State. Obviously, I organised one of them. The others came from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee—Members may well ask what it has to do with SRE, and I can explain if they wish me to—the Women and Equalities Committee, the Health Committee, and the Home Affairs Committee. All those Committees effectively said precisely the same thing: we need SRE to be introduced statutorily in our schools.

Finally, I want to say something about latitude for local government. The Select Committee did some work relating to children in care, particularly those with mental health difficulties. When we went to Trafford, it was strikingly obvious to us that through co-operation with other agencies, coterminous structures and strong leadership, the council was delivering outstanding results. Its ability to benefit from strategic leadership at the top end, operational leadership within the structures themselves, and a coterminous relationship not only with its own organisations and related agencies but with the police force was clearly extraordinarily beneficial for working practices and the way in which decisions were made and responses given on issues connected with children in care and children at risk. Therefore, the Government are right to move towards giving local government more latitude in the way it formulates its structures to deliver outcomes.

In short, there is a lot to be said for the Bill. It is critical that we acknowledge that some form of professional body will be good for social workers and social work generally. The absence of SRE is a pity. It is important, however, that the Government give the firm commitment I have asked for. Generally speaking, the Government are going in the right direction on local government.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am aware that very few clauses in the Bill affect Scotland but, as a member of the Education Committee, I may have some points of interest and I might be able to help the Bill to become even better.
[Marion Fellows]

When a child or young person cannot live at home, we all owe it to them to make the process of finding a new, stable family as efficient and straightforward as possible. Clause 1 would introduce seven “corporate parenting principles” that local authorities must “have regard to”. I ask the Minister: why are those not mandatory? The Joint Committee on Human Rights has said:

“We have considered the arguments and the evidence for and against introducing a statutory duty on public authorities in England requiring them to have due regard to the rights of children in the UNCRC in the exercise of their functions relating to children, equivalent to the duties already introduced in Wales and Scotland.”

If Wales and Scotland can have such a duty, I find it difficult to understand why it will not be mandatory in England. The Joint Committee went on to recommend that Parliament takes the opportunity presented by the Bill to ensure that there is “such a duty”.

It is important that children are the focus of and are at the heart of any Bill that is introduced in this Parliament. We need to look at how children are affected by legislation introduced by not just the Department for Education, but Departments across the board.

In Scotland, the First Minister has said that people who have experienced the care system will be the driving force of an independent review of how Scotland treats its looked-after children. That is the mandatory duty in action. In Scotland, we want to move forward and to listen to young people, and we are looking at extending what is happening in Scotland to people who have been in care and are going through the process of becoming adults who stand on their own. It is good that the Bill looks at what happens to children after they leave care, but I ask the Minister to examine what we do in Scotland, because we are moving forward at a far faster pace than England and Wales.

A former children’s Minister in Scotland has said:

“children don’t need a system that just stops things happening to them”.

We have safeguards, but we also need a system that

“makes things happen for them. A system that supports them to become the people they can be”.

fostering a sense “of belonging”. I am sure that the Minister agrees with that and with the fact that that should be a guiding principle for any legislation. What steps will the Government take to respond to the recommendations made earlier this year by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child? When do they plan to publish their official response? What further steps will the Government take to ensure that policy development across Whitehall has children’s rights at its heart?

Clause 31, which is the one measure in the Bill that affects Scotland, relates to whistleblowing. The Scottish Government acknowledge and respect the need for whistleblowing. They believe that procedures should be in place across the public and private sectors to support staff in raising any concerns about patient safety or malpractice, because that helps to improve our health service. That should be the case not only in the health service, but across all professions, especially in the social work sector, given the importance of child protection. We welcome this measure and are really keen for the Government to see it through.

Social work is regulated in Scotland, and I again ask the Minister to look at how the Scottish system works. When the Education Committee heard evidence from social workers and their representatives as part of the inquiry referred to by its Chair, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), one of the first things they said was that we should look at the Scottish system. I encourage Ministers to do that. The Scottish Social Services Council regulates the profession and all social workers in Scotland have to belong to it. I am pleased that England will be moving forward in a similar way.

I share the apprehensions expressed by the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) about creeping privatisation in the care sector, especially in relation to children. It is imperative that children should be looked after when they cannot be with their own parents and families, and the duty to protect children is shared by us all in society, not just by professionals. This is another reason why whistleblowers can be important.

The Bill will improve the situation in England, but it has to be seen in the context of child poverty. The Institute for Fiscal Studies states that child poverty in the UK is projected to rise by 8 percentage points by 2020, which makes it even more important that these provisions are right. Many more children could be drawn into the care system as a result of the ongoing austerity programme across the UK, so will the Minister please look at what we are doing in Scotland? We might not be perfect, and we might not get everything right, but we put children and their experiences at the heart of our system and we listen to them. I ask him please to look to the north, as well as to Wales, which is also doing really good work on child protection and childcare across the board.

4.57 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I welcome most parts of the Bill, and I particularly welcome the fact that it is now without certain parts, as I said earlier. It is good to have this opportunity to discuss child protection and social workers. We spend far too little time in the House highlighting the excellent practices that we expect our social workers to achieve in highly adverse conditions. I have always referred to social workers as our fourth emergency service, and I am proud to be a patron of the Social Worker of the Year awards, along with the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck). I attended the awards dinner just over a week ago, at which fantastic examples of dedication, hard work, skill and expertise were on display. Alas, none of that made it into the mainstream media, as is so often the case.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the challenges facing social workers are particularly intense as a result not only of immense reductions in funding, but of the fast-changing climate and the Government’s occasional initiative-itis that seems to attach itself to the social work sector?
Tim Loughton: Social workers are certainly under a huge amount of pressure, but that initiative—itis has, to an extent, gone into reverse, not least through the shrinking of the last six years of the “working together” rule book—the bible of social workers and social work practice—which amounted to more than 750 pages when this Government came into office. Social workers were spending all their time checking what the rulebook said, looking over their shoulders and ticking boxes, rather than being allowed to get on with the business of being social workers, and eyeballing families and the vulnerable children whom they are there to protect and work with. With the support of Professor Munro, that work was an important initiative that tried to take away many of the administrative burdens on social workers, notwithstanding their other pressures and challenges.

I am proud of the work that the Conservative party has done in this area, starting with the commission on social work that I chaired back in 2007. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) is in the Chamber because she played an important role in the commission. We produced the document “No More Blame Game—The Future for Children’s Social Workers”, which is as relevant today as it was then. The trouble is that social workers are still too often subject to the blame game, especially in the tabloid press, from which it would appear that it is social workers who abuse and murder vulnerable young children. Of course they do not; they are there to try to protect such children. Parents, carers and others commit those foul acts, but people would not believe that based on the reports. Too many people view our social workers with disdain.

From that piece of work, of which I am proud, came the suggestions for consultant social workers and a chief social worker. In 2010, our manifesto commitment was to take child protection back to the frontline. I am also pleased and proud that the first review initiated by the Department for Education after the 2010 election was not about schools or education matters; it was the excellent Munro review into child protection. I was slightly surprised that the Minister prayed in aid Professor Munro so explicitly. I appointed Professor Munro and worked closely with her, but the problem is that many of her 15 pertinent recommendations are still to be implemented, and they do not involve the removal of a local authority’s basic duty to protect vulnerable young children.

I support the Bill as it stands, but it could certainly be improved by a number of enhancing amendments, although I would not include among those any that would rehash clauses 29 to 33. I was alarmed by the Minister’s comments that strongly suggested that those clauses will be revisited. That would be a shame because, after the good work done in the Lords, we were promised a period of reflection—perhaps it could be referred to as a pause, as we have done in the Lords—we were promised a period of reflection before they hurry into repeating what was not working properly is when social workers were spending, through the integrated children’s system and other very bureaucratic systems, up to 80% of their time in front of a computer filling in forms to do with child protection, rather than getting out there and dealing with children face to face. That was a huge waste of resources, but more importantly a huge waste of opportunities to deal more effectively and early on with children, who really did need to have the support, and often intervention, of professional services and social workers in particular.

Despite all these innovations, we still need to do a lot better for vulnerable children, children in the care system and our care leavers. It is a fact that 40%—almost half—of our care leavers aged 19 to 21 are classed as not in education, employment or training, and 4% of them are in custody. Two thirds of children in the care system have special educational needs, almost half of them are in custody. It is a fact that 40%—almost half—of our care leavers aged 19 to 21 are classed as not in education, employment or training, and 4% of them are in custody. Two thirds of children in the care system have special educational needs, almost half of them are in custody. It is a fact that 40%—almost half—of our care leavers aged 19 to 21 are classed as not in education, employment or training, and 4% of them are in custody. Two thirds of children in the care system have special educational needs, almost half of them are in custody.

I particularly welcome some of the Bill’s corporate parenting principles—although it will be interesting to see how they work in practice—that apply to physical and mental health, which is so important. Although this Government have again done a lot to raise the profile of mental health, particularly among children and young people, and have injected a further £1.4 billion into that area, the problem is that not nearly enough of it—and that is not enough in itself—is getting through to the frontline, to help the children and young people who so desperately need it, when they need it and where they need it.
These are challenging times. The NAO report on children in need of protection, to which various hon. Members have already referred, flagged up some worrying observations. Too often the way we look after vulnerable children is a postcode lottery. We are still very poor at sharing best practice in this country, yet a child in need, a child in care and a child in desperate need of protection should be dealt with no differently whether they are in Durham, Worthing, Exeter or anywhere else throughout the United Kingdom.

There was a surge following the horrific case of Baby Peter, but the number of children coming into the care system continues to rise: there are now in excess of 70,000 children in the care system in England—the highest since 1985, when the environment in respect of why children tended to come into the care system was very different. I do not know whether we need to take more children into care, or fewer, but I do know that we need to take the right children into care at the right time, and give them the right support and services if they cannot be supported living with their families or other kinship carers.

Another thing I am very proud of is the Government’s initiative on promoting adoption, which had fallen into neglect, frankly, after the good work done in the Adoption and Children Act 2002. The adoption figures have started to fall back considerably and there is still a very big grey space following the Munby judgment. But that should not have happened, because those adoption reforms were about bringing forward an easier system for adopters to offer their services and for children to go through all the hoops. There were too many hoops and it took too long for children to get adopted. We needed to bring onside not only those involved in adoption at the local authority level, which largely we did, but, contemporaneously and in sympathy, those in the legal profession, as many judges felt put upon, in that they were being told how to run cases in their courts. I am afraid that the Government have failed to do that and should not therefore be surprised by the disappointing reversal in the adoption figures, which I hope will be reversed again, because adoption does offer the best chance at a second childhood—a second possibility of being brought up in a safe and loving family—for a lot of children who still do not get that chance and are still in the care system.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that although many younger children are being adopted, it is far more difficult to place older children? We need to do more to promote the benefits to those children of adoption at a later age.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Lady is right about that, but shiny, squeaky new babies have always been much more attractive to people who want to adopt than problematic teenagers who have been through all the trials and tribulations of broken families—perhaps abuse, neglect, mental health problems and behavioural disorders—and have been pushed from pillar to post in the care system. Those are the children we have most let down, which is one reason why the introduction of adoption scorecards was based not just on improving the number of children adopted, but on concentrating on those harder-to-adopt children: older children; large sibling groups; and children from black and minority ethnic communities. Too often these children were at the back of the adoption queue. I am glad to say that in recent years disproportionately they have found themselves more likely to get adopted than they were before. This is still not enough and there remains a lot to be done, but that was absolutely the right focus to bring in over the past few years.

Another thing I am concerned about is that despite all the good work the Government did on paralleling the kraamzorg system for health visitors in Holland, we have lost 722 health visitors since January and there has been a 13% decrease in the number of school nurses since 2010. They are really important people in early intervention—in identifying children with problems, and those for whom the support of social services and other caring services is essential, sooner rather than later.

Of course, I am also worried by the recent rise, again, in social worker vacancy rates in many authorities around the country, and too often the positions are taken by temporary social workers. Social work, particularly when dealing with child protection, is an area where staff need to forge empathetic relationships with those vulnerable children and families whom they are there to look after. Being pushed from pillar to post, from one home to another, from one social worker to another reviewing officer—or whoever it may be—only accentuates the instability and vulnerability of those children.

I worry when, even in this place, we are still too quick to point the finger of blame at the social workers because a child has been brutally assaulted or killed, as still happens in too many cases, by their carer, parent or close relative. We hear the talk of “wilful neglect”. There are social workers who are not doing their job properly, and there are social workers who are not up to the job and should not be in social work, and they should be removed from it, but they are a small minority. We should not make the rest of our excellent, hard-working, dedicated social worker force feel constantly that they are the ones to blame for many of these tragedies. We have to up everybody’s game, but they are part of the solution; in the vast majority of cases, they are not part of the problem.

It is odd therefore that at the heart of the original Bill, since eviscerated of clauses 29 to 33, which it would seem are about to make an unfortunate reappearance, were radical new proposals supposedly to test new ways of working, under the guise of promoting innovation. As I said earlier, the clauses were not remotely welcomed by the vast majority of people who are involved in the whole field of child protection. They were opposed by the British Association of Social Workers, the Care Leavers Association, the Children’s Rights Alliance for England, CoramBAAF, which is the Government’s appointed adoption provider, the Fostering Network, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and Action for Children. In various polls, about 90% of working social workers did not support those clauses either, which was hardly surprising given that the clauses came out of the blue. There was no consultation on absolutely fundamental changes to the way in which we apply duties of care to vulnerable children in this country.

I pay tribute to the House of Lords, particularly to Lord Ramsbotham, for putting forward the amendments that saw those clauses taken out of the Bill. Lord Ramsbotham referred to clause 29 as nothing less than “the usurpation of the proper parliamentary process.”
He asked
“how the courts are expected to respond where a young person or
child in a particular local authority area is clearly disadvantaged
by the arbitrary disapplication or modification of the law as it is
applied in all other parts of the country.”—[Official Report,
House of Lords, 8 November 2016; Vol. 776, c. 1056.]

As I said earlier, a child needs protection wherever he or
she may be in the country. We cannot have a competition
between different areas on ways of looking after vulnerable
children, some of which will not work and some of which
might. Every child needs the protection of the law as set
out by Parliament, and it should not be subject to a
postcode lottery, as is convenient for certain local authorities.

In the debate in the other place, Lord Low said:

“It is perfectly possible to test different ways of working...within
the existing legislative framework...it makes no sense to get rid of
the duty.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 8 November 2016;
Vol. 776, c. 1063.]

The squeeze on funding, which Members have mentioned,
and which is, I am afraid, inevitable at the moment—
[Interuption.]
I am afraid that it is inevitable because of the disastrous way in which the Labour Government
ran the economy into the ground. In too many cases
now local authorities are providing only what is their
duty; additional services are no longer on the agenda at all.
Taking away that duty means that some of these
fundamental things could not happen in the future.

Clause 29 as it was would have allowed local authorities
to request exemptions from their statutory duties in
children’s social care. Every Act of Parliament and every
subordinate piece of legislation concerned with children’s
social care from 1933 onwards could have been affected.
The proposed mechanism for exemption orders was to
be statutory instruments, which would have handed
over enormous powers to the Secretary of State and the
Department for Education. I am afraid that the Minister
for School Standards is wrong: the DfE acknowledged
that this part of the Bill directly concerns children’s
fundamental rights. How can vulnerable children challenge
those lack of services? I gave an example—it was one of
many examples raised in the House of Lords—of
independent reviewing officers. I am a big fan of IROs—I
think we can do better, and there is a bit of a postcode
lottery—as their role is to stand up and be the voice, or
the advocate, of children who are not getting the services
to which they are entitled and which they need from
local authorities. If no IRO is available because an
exemption has been applied for and granted, which
means that the authority has no IROs, where is that
child to go? There are not just IROs, but key legal
protections that exist in the form of regulations now,
including the ban on corporal punishment in foster care
and children’s homes, protection for disabled children
placed away from home, leaving care entitlements and
complaints procedures. All of those could be granted
an exemption and could disappear from fundamental
rights, which we apply to protect vulnerable children now.
This would be the first time in the history of children’s
welfare that legislation made for all vulnerable children
and young people could be disappplied in a particular area.
This is a very radical proposal that warranted at least a
Green Paper and a White Paper and proper consultation,
but there was none.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the NSPCC and
Action for Children said that

“the case that the Government is making presents considerable
risk. Despite numerous conversations with ministers and officials,
the evidence for the need for this power remains unconvincing
and does not justify the potential risks of suspending primary
legislation.”

The British Association of Social Workers said:

“If the clauses are re-introduced it will pave the way for
significant and dangerous changes to the provision of children’s
social care which would jeopardise hard fought victories for
children's rights spanning decades.”

How would the pilots for these provisions be monitored?
How would we monitor whether children were still safe
and what the results were for those children? It is no
surprise that only one in 10 practising social workers
surveyed by the BASW and by Unison thought this was
a good idea. That is why I have severe reservations if the
clause is to be returned to the Bill.

The Munro review took away much of the bureaucracy
from social workers. It gave flexibility on the timing of
assessments of children and how social workers could
prioritise. It gave greater powers and confidence back to
social workers to use their professional judgment to do
what they thought best in the interests of vulnerable
children. Sometimes they will get it wrong. I always say
to social workers, “What I want to do, and what the
Munro review was all about, is to give you the confidence
to make a mistake—hopefully, not often, but to do it for
the very best of reasons, not simply because that’s what
it says on page 117 of the rule book and you needed to
tick the boxes.” That is not what social work is all about.
It is not a science. It is a complicated and challenging job.

If we are going to give social workers those flexibilities
and allow them to act in different and innovative ways
because they think that is the best way of looking after
vulnerable children, we do not need to take away the
statutory duties of the local authorities which are the
corporate parents of those children, so that those new
ways do not have to abide by the fundamental duties
which ensure that social workers are doing the right
thing and looking after those vulnerable children.

Finally, I shall look at a few specific clauses and ask
the Minister some questions, which I hope he will refer
to in his summing up. Clause 1 is about corporate
parenting principles, which I welcome, but it is not clear
exactly what they amount to in practice. Are they in
addition to the section 23 commitments of the Children
Act 1989 or do they replace them? I have used examples
which I welcome: promoting physical and mental health,
providing opportunities to secure the best outcomes
for children, supporting children in care and adoption
and preventing and tackling child poverty. Nobody could vote
against such things, but in clause 3 new section 23CBZ(7)
states:

“Where a former relevant child to whom this section applies is
not receiving advice and support under this section, the local
authority must offer such advice and support...at least once in
12 months.”

Once in every 12 months will not go very far for a
vulnerable child who needs intensive help. Subsection(4)
makes provision for personal advisers. The problem is
that too many children in care whom I met and children
leaving care had never heard of personal advisers, let
alone knew who their own personal adviser was.

In clause 4 new section 23ZZA(3) gives a local authority
this extraordinary power:

“A local authority in England may do anything else that they
consider appropriate with a view to promoting the educational
achievement of relevant children educated in their area.”—
motherhood and apple pie. Why do we require that sort of thing in legislation? It strikes me that a bit much of this is a bit too mushy and full of cotton wool—too many vague assumptions which in practice, particularly with funding pressures and duties taken away, will not amount to a row of beans, if we are not careful.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Obviously, the primary focus and concern is the duty of care to children, but there is also the issue of mothers who might well end up having successive children who end up in care. The local authority needs to have a responsibility for those vulnerable women, who may well be victims of a coercive relationship and have complex needs as a result. The sooner there is intervention and therapeutic care, the better, to avoid subsequent issues—maybe subsequent children and subsequent costs and concerns for all.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend, who has great expertise in this area, is right. Of course we cannot look at vulnerable children in isolation; we need to look at their families holistically. There are some really good examples. I hope that the Minister will stick to his word and provide funding for things such as FDAC, the family drug and alcohol court set up by the excellent Nick Crichton, a fantastic family district judge.

At FDAC, a mother—often a single mother—at risk of losing a child to the care system because of substance abuse or an abusive partner, say, is given a clear choice of an intensive package that will help her back on to the straight and narrow so that she can bring up her own child. It is a tough, challenging exercise. Alternatively, perhaps both parents will be involved. If they are able to do that, the whole family is put back together and the child stays, which is the best outcome. If not, that child will head for care.

I have sat in court, as has my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who will speak shortly, seeing mums who have had six, seven or eight children taken into the care system. We have to tackle the root of that problem: why is it? Is it that the mother just does not know how to parent, in which case what are society, social workers and the troubled families programme doing to help her become a fit parent if she remotely can? If she cannot, that child must go to a safe family elsewhere who can give them a second chance of a beneficial and happy upbringing.

I would like to make a few other quick points. Mr Deputy Speaker; I am aware that there are not too many speakers for this debate, so I have an opportunity to elaborate on some important points a little longer than the Chair normally allows. I know how generous you are in these matters, which are of great interest to you.

Clause 5 is about the designation of a member of staff at school “having responsibility for promoting the educational achievement” of children in the care system. That is a good initiative, but it already exists for children with caring responsibilities and alas that does not work in practice. It is a good idea, but it has to have some teeth so that it means something on the ground: that children in the care system have special attention from a designated teacher who understands the particular needs of such children, who are often subject to bullying, mental health problems and everything else. There must be more than a clause on paper in a Bill: the proposal has to work in practice.

There are some good points on the child safeguarding review panels, although I have concerns about the independence of the panels. Certainly when we gave a commitment before the 2010 election that we would publish serious case reviews—opposed by the Labour party, although the reviews have now become the norm—one of my concerns was also about the calibre of the people producing those SCRs and the quality of some of the reports. Effectively, they were not properly monitored; they were monitored only on a local basis. Some time ago, I put forward the idea that a national body should oversee the quality and that there should be a national register of authors of serious case reviews with a requirement for continuous professional development; there needed to be training, which would be updated. Before now, anybody, effectively, could apply to be the author of a serious case review. We need to regulate that important area rather better.

Under clause 13, the panel “must publish the report, unless they consider it inappropriate to do so.”

Given that, previously, when serious case reviews were published, they were seen only by a few people locally and Department for Education officials if we were lucky, it was really important that, other than in exceptional circumstances where there could be detriment to surviving children or families, the reviews should be published and the lessons learned to see how they could apply elsewhere. This new review panel is an exercise in doing that and in disseminating best practice rather better. I very much support that, and I would like more details on how it is going to work.

Then, however, we have the section about safeguarding partners. These appear to be replacing the local safeguarding children boards, which are a really important feature of bringing together local agencies to make sure that we have workable solutions and partnerships in place, particularly to deal with child sexual exploitation at the moment. We need to be convinced about how these new bodies are better than, or different from, local safeguarding children boards and, in particular, about how they are going to be funded. Clause 20, on funding, says: “The safeguarding partners for a local authority area in England may make payments” towards the expenditure of these bodies “by contributing to a fund” or making payments directly. It also says: “Relevant agencies for a local authority area....may make payments.”

The problem with LSCBs at the moment is that not all the partners pull their weight. In too many cases, key partners are, first, not turning up at the table and, secondly, not helping to fund the work of the LSCBs. Too often, it fails to the local authority—the default partner—to pick up too much of the tab. If we are going to put these things on a statutory basis, can we make sure that it is laid out clearly and unequivocally that the funding contribution from, and the active participation of, all the relevant partners is absolutely essential?

I am also concerned because clause 21 says: “The safeguarding partners for two or more local authority areas in England may agree that their areas are to be treated as a single area.”
The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families (Edward Timpson): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Tim Loughton: Yes—I am delighted I am getting a response.

Edward Timpson: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the new Social Work England regulatory body will not be an Executive agency; it will be a non-departmental public body, so it will be at arm's length from the Government and provide the independence that people called for and that I think is right.

Tim Loughton: I am grateful, and gratefully reassured, and I look forward to being able to support that provision, as opposed to some others that I am not so reassured about.

Edward Timpson: In clause 31, one of the overarching objectives of Social Work England is “to promote and maintain public confidence in social workers in England”, and that is quite right. However, that is also the job of the chief social worker. One disappointment to me is that when we set up the chief social worker—originally, it was to be one chief social worker covering the elderly and children, but then it was split into a child social worker and an adult care social worker—the point was for them to be a high-profile face of social work, particularly for the public, and a reassuring face of child protection for the public in times of high-profile tragedies and disasters involving safeguarding issues. Therefore, while the current chief social worker for children said recently: “I don’t pretend I am the voice of the profession. I am a civil servant and I see my role” as “offering advice to ministers based on what other people tell me about a system”,

I think there is more to the role. This person must not just be a civil servant. They need to work closely alongside Ministers and civil servants, but equally—in action out on the street—to work alongside social workers, consultant social workers and practitioners at the sharp end. We need to revisit the balance that we currently have in that regard.

I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker, for going on at length. This is a subject that interests me enormously. I have spent most of my career in Parliament involved with child safeguarding and child protection. I am very proud of the progress that has been made over years, but very worried that we still have a long way to go. Most of this Bill will help in that journey, but certain parts will not. I hope that when scrutinising the Bill in Committee and on Report, the Government reflect a little more before they rush to do some things that clearly are not in the best interests of vulnerable children.

5.35 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a true pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and his detailed, precise and, some might say, exhaustive analysis of the Bill before us. I think I can speak for all Labour Members in saying that we share many of the concerns that he outlined about getting right the legislation on how we protect young people in our country. I associate myself with the excellent introduction by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) in which she raised Labour Members’ concerns about the Bill while recognising that many parts are welcome and could take us forward. We share the wish across the House to provide the best safeguarding for all children.

I see this Bill as being about how we best support our children in an imperfect world—a world that we are all painfully aware of through our casework and work within our communities. That is why we all share the concern expressed by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham about the importance of partnership working—in particular, working with professionals. Many of us will have dealt with cases where we are acutely aware that we are not professionals but wish to help, and where the guidance of social workers with years of experience in complex and delicate matters has been of vital assistance to us. We therefore recognise that not involving them in this conversation may take us backwards rather than forwards as a country. Some of us have real concerns about what will replace the local safeguarding boards, and how we make sure that the multi-partnership work that has worked in some parts of the country and led to some significant changes is not lost in the process of recognising where change is needed.

In a wish not to indulge one of the customs of this House where the same thing is said several times, let me try to offer the Minister some ideas about things that I believe are missing from the Bill. I hope that we will find cross-party consensus in adding to it. One of those things, as well as a concern to avoid any suggestion of privatising such a delicate and important service, is to make sure that in talking about safeguarding we do not include the concept of prevention, particularly the idea of acting earlier within the system to make sure that children are protected. I am particularly drawn to clause 16, which talks about the safeguarding and promotion of welfare of all children, and the role that local authorities might play in that.

Bearing in mind the comments of the Minister, who is sadly no longer in his place, about ensuring that a robust safeguarding system is in place, I wish to let him know that I will table amendments to bring in one of the most crucial parts of safeguarding we have yet to get right—sex and relationships education for all young
people. We cannot say that we safeguard our children when we make sure that they are taught about composting but not consent. Many of us may have stories of our own sex and relationships education. I might have feared that I was forever scarred by having once fallen asleep in a classroom only to be awoken by somebody waving a female condom in my face. However, it is no laughing matter. Many of us are acutely aware of the many pressures on our young people that we need to be able to address, and, crucially, in a positive and inclusive manner. All parents will tell us that they are concerned about the world today. In a former lifetime, I was a youth worker, and we used to say that we had all been 15-year-olds but none of us had been 15-year-olds in today’s world. I am incredibly grateful, for a start, that Facebook was not around when I was at school. One third of young girls in this country report being sexually harassed at school. Three quarters of girls in a Girlguiding survey say that they were anxious about sexual harassment in their age group, and 5,500 sexual offences, including 600 rapes, were recorded in UK schools over the past three years alone.

I say that not to make parents fearful, but to ask what we can do to make sure that every young person in this country has the tools and the confidence to lead the lives that we would all wish for them, and to be able to know when no means no and yes means yes. That is why it is important that we do not let it become the internet that educates our young people or the playground that tells them what passes for acceptable sexual conduct, but that we give every young person the kind of training that we would want for our own children.

That is not a critique of parents. Indeed, many parents work very hard to make sure that their children have good ideas about sex and relationships education. We need to recognise that parents can only ever be 50% of the answer, because this is also about the other children that children will meet. Giving every child good sex and relationships education should be considered part of safeguarding, because it will make sure that every young person, whoever they come into contact with, has the skills and the tools to lead the life that they wish to lead and to deal with the modern world as it is, not as some might wish it to be.

I know that Members across the House will support that proposal. I am mindful of the support of the Select Committee Chairs, one of whom—the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who signed up to a letter, but he did not do so on behalf of the Committee. As a member of that Committee, I did not support it. I certainly support proposals for high-quality sex and relationships education. There are ways of achieving that, not least through building resilience and supporting families, which is what the Bill is about. We can do that in lots of ways, not just the path suggested by the hon. Lady. I ask her to please acknowledge that there is significant opposition to her proposal.

Stella Creasy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, but I hope that we will be able to change his mind during our discussion. We have been having this debate for some time, and I tell him plainly that the young people of Britain are crying out for this kind of education. Time and again they say, “Ignorance is not bliss; confidence is what we want.” It is not about replacing parents; it is about supporting them and making sure that young people, wherever they are, have the right environment. It is too important not to listen to our young people when they ask for this kind of education to be done in an age-appropriate fashion in their schools. Now is the time to get it right. Select Committee Chairs acknowledge that, and, although the hon. Gentleman did not support the letter, I believe that many do. It is right that we have this debate and I hope that we can allay those fears, because the consequences of not doing so is to leave young people at risk, and I do not think that that is acceptable in the 21st century.

I agreed with the Secretary of State for Education when she said that she was minded to see this happen and that she wanted to consider all the options, and I believe that this Bill is the right way to do it. There were discussions about doing it as part of the proposed education Bill, but that has stalled, for whatever reason. The matter is too important to delay any longer. That means using this legislative opportunity to acknowledge that, in order to safeguard every young person, they need to be taught about consent—not just the biology of sex, but how to have positive, equal and safe relationships. The honest truth is that that is not happening for too many of our young people and we are seeing the consequences.

I will ask the Government to make sure that that work is part of safeguarding at a local level; that schools are given the guidance to make it available to every young person in an age-appropriate and inclusive way; that they work with communities; and, above all, that they do not simply consult, but set a timetable, because for too long our young people have been asking us to get this right, and for too long their voice has not been heard.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) is no longer in his place, but I hope that there will be cross-party support for amendments that I will table on this subject. I will certainly seek that support, and I know that many Labour Members—including, I suspect, the Front-Bench team—will support those amendments. I would be happy to sit down with Ministers and look at how we can make these proposals work, because I do not think that any of us can be happy with the situation that obtains. There is general agreement that this needs to happen, and yet there is no legislation to make it happen. We are failing our young people if we keep kicking this issue into the long grass.

I hope that I can convince the Minister that there will be cross-party support on another area as well. Although the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) is yet to be convinced about the case for the changes I have just outlined, I hope that he will be convinced to back the amendments that I will propose on child
refugees. He and I were certainly on the same side when it came to supporting the young people left in Calais. I acknowledge the Minister’s statement about safeguarding child refugees and recognising the importance of extending safeguarding proposals to our young people. However, I believe that his statement was undermined by the guidance that was issued by the Home Office at the same time. The Minister’s statement caused the noble Lord Dubs—a tremendous champion of our child refugees—to withdraw his amendment to this very Bill about this very matter. That amendment was withdrawn on the basis that there was good will across the House about making sure that we safeguarded child refugees, including during the process of transferring them from overseas to the UK.

Catherine West: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her outstanding work on unaccompanied asylum seekers, who are often voiceless. Does she think that enough is being done to provide post-trauma and post-traumatic stress counselling for those children, who have seen things that are quite unimaginably horrible?

Stella Creasy: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. Counselling should be part of the safeguarding process.

Many of us who deal with these young people are concerned about the fact that many of them are still in France, precisely because of the guidance issued by the Home Office, which set out a two-step process and specified that nationality would be one of the criteria for helping child refugees—ahead of their best interests. It cannot be in the best interests of a child to put nationality before need, and I hope that the Minister will recognise that the detail in his statement of 1 November is undermined by such a strategy. It is right that we clarify in amendments to the Bill that the country will always put the best interests of a child first, and that includes child refugees.

Mr Burrows: I was with the hon. Lady on the Dubs II amendment. Perhaps the link with her proposed amendments is that we can agree on the outcomes, but the question is how we achieve them. If we will the ends, is a prescribed piece of statute needed or are there other means to achieve what we want? We will debate amendments about SRE at a later stage, but the issue with her proposals about safeguarding is the practical implementation. We saw with the Dubs amendment that we need to pay careful attention to practical implementation. Prescribed legislation is not always required, but we need to hold the Minister to account and ensure that he stays true to the good words in his statement.

Stella Creasy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. I agree with much of what he has said about the difference between having to prescribe, and recognising locally led solutions. However, I disagree with him fundamentally on both points for precisely the reason that he is putting out. The outcomes that are being achieved are not what we desired; they are not the will of this place. The desired outcome in sex and relationships education is not being achieved at a local level because there is no clarity about what schools should be teaching, so too many young people are not getting the appropriate support. Even with the best will in the world and the best parenting, unless we wrap those children up in cotton wool, the other young people they meet may present a risk to them.

So, too, with child refugees. Sadly, with the Dubs amendments, good will has slowly ebbed away in this place when the implementation has not matched the outcome that we desired. Nowhere is that clearer than when the Government try to say that nationality is more important than need. Many of us were delighted by the statement that the Minister made on 1 November, and then we were horrified to read the Home Office guidance, which seemed to stand against the spirit of the statement. I believe it is necessary to clarify that we must always act in the best interests of those children, just as Lord Dubs sought to act in their best interests when he tabled his original amendment.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate will know the battle that we have had throughout proceedings on the legislation. As difficult and uncomfortable as some of the debates may be, and although some people may have concerns about child refugees, we must surely all want to act in their best interests. I am sorry to have to tell the Minister that some of the Government’s conduct has led many of us to believe that amendments are necessary. I will seek support from across the House to make this happen so that we can put the matter beyond doubt, because, sadly, the guidance from the Home Office does cast doubt on it.

I do not wish to echo the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham in terms of length—not to undermine anything he said—but through my proposals I am looking forward to being part of the legislative process. I am looking forward to scrutinising the Bill. I am looking forward to seeking cross-party agreement on these issues, because all of us in this House recognise that protecting children is one of the most important jobs we do. There may be disagreements about how to get there, but we do have to get there. We cannot avoid these issues any more. Whether it is our young people facing an uncertain world or the young people stuck in child centres in France right now, we have a responsibility for all of them, just as we have a responsibility for children through our corporate parenting rules. I hope that the Minister will listen and respond on all these issues. I am happy to meet him, as I am sure are many others, but we will not rest until this is resolved.

5.50 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and to have heard not only Opposition Members’ broad support for the Bill, but the important points they have raised. There can never be too much consensus on these issues. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, we just need to do better for vulnerable children. Challenge is part of that, as are new ideas. We cannot allow the Bill to be a missed opportunity in terms of prevention or the knowledge we give to children, because they are as much a part of the safeguarding process as any other structure or law that we put through this place.

The focus of the Bill is very much children who cannot remain in the family home, but its scope has been widened, particularly through Government amendments made in the other place, to broader issues around child
[Mrs Maria Miller]

welfare. I will focus on some of the broader issues, particularly the provisions regarding adopted children and ongoing support for them; the more contentious issue of the power to innovate, which some Members have talked about today, the measures on which were voted down in the other place; and, finally, what more the Bill could do to improve the welfare of children and to empower children.

The Bill proposes improvements to the long-term placement of children for adoption and the assessment of their current and future needs through care orders. I hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to tell the House how the new measure sits alongside recent Government announcements on the adoption support fund. In particular, I am thinking about the interim cap on financial support that was put in place midway through the financial year.

The adoption support fund ensures that important therapeutic support can be funded for adopted children, some of whom are coping with difficult trauma, complex and challenging behaviour, and mental health problems. That can result in a high risk of adoption breakdown. The fund already helps thousands of families—I believe it was 3,500 last year—and the Government are increasing the budget to about £23 million this year. That significant investment perhaps underlines the Minister’s deep knowledge of the subject and his understanding of the challenges that parents of adopted children face, which he has gained from his own family’s experiences. I put on record my thanks to the Minister for all that he has done to support families with adopted children. I know that my constituents are enormously grateful for his expertise in this area.

Perhaps we should be unsurprised to hear that the demand for the fund has outstripped the supply of finances. The Minister, with the inevitable fiscal duties on him, had to introduce a cap to the budget in October. Although that was understandable as a normal response to keep control of budgetary pressures, it has inevitably created uncertainties for families such as my constituents, Mr and Mrs Cross, who adopted their son in August 2013. Mr and Mrs Cross are incredible. They have adopted a young child with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder which, as many will know, means their son requires significant support.

Mr and Mrs Cross have taken the necessary measures and are doing a fantastic job. The child’s therapy has been hugely beneficial, leading to real progress, but because it costs in excess of the new £5,000 cap, it is uncertain whether the funding will be available in the near future. The next phase of treatment costs about £10,000 and would require the local authority in Hampshire to match fund, in year, any costs over £5,000. Clause 8 calls for long-term plans for the care of a child to be in place, yet my constituents, who have made an incredible choice to care for a severely disabled child, are now unsure whether his care can be funded. I hope that the Minister, perhaps in his response to the debate, will reflect on how a local authority such as mine in Hampshire might respond, and reassure Mr and Mrs Cross that the support for their child will continue.

The second issue I want to speak about is the controversial power to innovate, which was contentious in the other place. Indeed, the then clauses 15 to 18 were removed from the Bill after a vote. The provisions would have allowed local authorities to apply to the Secretary of State to test new ways of raising children’s outcomes and to allow high-performing local authorities to be involved in that work. It is important that we pay heed to the strongly held concerns raised by expert voices, not just in the other place but outwith this place, and I will be interested to hear the Minister’s response to those concerns, which have been echoed again today.

None the less, the Department has put in place something that we need to look at again: the idea of giving “partners in practice”—my local authority in Hampshire is one of only eight in the country—the opportunity to look at innovative ways of working. If we are to find better ways to care for the vulnerable children about whom we all feel so deeply, we need to be open to new ideas, so I hope that we can revisit this idea, which was strongly supported by my local authority as well as experts such as Professor Eileen Munro. It is right that this tightly regulated area is as protected as it is, but I cannot believe that there would not be a benefit from our looking at new ways of working. We will all have seen examples of that in today’s briefings.

The problem might be—hon. Members might have put their finger on it today—that the proposals came somewhat out of the blue, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said. We need to take care that we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater. I do not think that the Minister had any intention for the proposals to create competition between local authorities; rather, the intention was to drive improvement, which we would all applaud. No one is suggesting that this approach would do anything other than drive innovation in an area that has developed, inevitably, in a piecemeal way in response to the various and sometimes quite appalling situations in which local authorities have found themselves.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham talked about the need for policy and law to work in practice. When I read the Hansard report of what the Minister in the other place said, I felt that that was exactly the purpose of the proposals. I think the intention is that local authorities are able to look at how they can make the law work in practice, rather than creating something of a postcode lottery. When there is an insight into better ways of working, authorities need to be able to pass it on to other areas to improve the way in which we care for this vulnerable group of individuals.

The final issue I want to raise, building on what the hon. Member for Walthamstow said, is what we are doing to empower children themselves, especially vulnerable children who might not have the consistent involvement of their parents in their lives and who, frankly, face really difficult situations when they have to take decisions about their own welfare without the input of other adults to guide them. This Bill is one of many pieces of legislation that have put in place laws, procedures and protocols to help to protect and improve the welfare of children through a whole host of agencies, but that does not directly address what we will do to help those children themselves. We need to ensure that they are armed with the knowledge that they need to make the right choices to safeguard themselves.

That is not a new concept, but something that we have done for many years. For example, we have tried to encourage children to understand the dangers of drugs,
alcohol and, indeed, early pregnancy. It is important to take that forward in a more structured way. As parents and carers, we know that we have the prime responsibility to protect our children, but we also know that our children need the ability to make good choices. We cannot be there 24/7: social workers cannot be there 24/7. It is crucial that children have the ability to make decisions themselves in an informed way.

The Bill provides a perfect opportunity for the Government to respond positively to the five Select Committee Chairs who have called for PSHE and, in particular, sex and relationships education, to be made compulsory for school-age children. I am one of those Select Committee Chairs. Our work taking evidence on our recent inquiry on sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools was a sobering experience for all members of our Select Committee.

We need to help to empower children to make their own decisions. When we hear the evidence and some of the statistics about the challenges that young people face in respect of their own personal welfare, it becomes clear that this debate is overdue and that we need to take action now. Two thirds of girls regularly experience sexual harassment in school. Children as young as eight are seeing online pornography as a place to learn about sex, and there were 47,000 sexual offences against children in this country in the last year, a third of which were perpetrated by children against other children. Communities should be able to enjoy freedom and safety, and school communities are no different from any others.

When we look at what happens to children after their school life, we find that, according to a study by the National Union of Students, 68% of students say that they are subject to verbal or physical sexual harassment on campuses. The problem does not stop there, as some 85% of women are experiencing unwanted sexual attention in public places.

The hon. Member for Walthamstow is absolutely right when she says that this is all about prevention and making sure that we can stop these problems from happening in the first place by ensuring that children have the knowledge they need to make good decisions, to understand what consent means, and to achieve some control over their own personal space and their own bodies.

The Bill has been extensively debated in the other place, where many amendments were tabled, particularly relating to the importance for the welfare of children of joint working between agencies, including local authorities, the police and clinical commissioning groups. In the other place, the Government tabled amendment 113, which dealt with that, because they recognised that a multifaceted strategy was vital to children’s welfare.

Another set of organisations also have a crucial role to play in children’s welfare: schools. If the Bill is to do what it sets out to do and to promote welfare for children, it must make sex and relationships education compulsory. What is currently compulsory in secondary schools is the science of reproduction; the rest is based on guidance that was last updated at the turn of the millennium and makes no reference to pornography; through which, as we know, more young children are finding out about sex. We also know that 40% of schools do not teach SRE very well. Perhaps all that explains why organisations such as Barnardo’s have made clear that the development of an early understanding of and respect for each other’s bodies, and a knowledge of when to ask for help through PSHE, can help to build resilience and an understanding of what healthy relationships look like, as well as mitigating the effects of exposure to such things as pornography.

Tim Loughton: I am closely following what my right hon. Friend is saying and agree with much of it. As is the wont of speeches on Bills concerning children, hers is straying into a number of subjects that relate to children but are not dealt with in the Bill, but I support her on this subject. Does she agree that one way of securing the better-quality PHSE and SRE that we desperately need would be to bring in experts from outside schools, especially young experts such as youth workers? They could empathise with young people who would listen to them, take notice of them and act on their advice. Would that not be better than giving the task to Mrs Miggins the geography teacher who just happens to have a couple of free periods on a Thursday afternoon?

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Expertise is necessary when it comes to teaching those subjects. However, as I have said, I have raised this issue because if we are to tackle the welfare of children, we must ensure that we do so effectively. It is no good leaving children out of the equation; we must tackle their welfare head on. While I do not disagree with my hon. Friend’s point that undertrained teachers will not provide effective sex and relationships education, I think that all teachers—whether they are Mrs Miggins teaching geography or anyone else—need to understand how they can stop the sexual harassment and sexual violence that too many young people told the Committee they took for granted in their everyday school lives, and which we would never take for granted as adults. All teachers should have some sort of training in this sphere because they are responsible for the wellbeing of children while they are at school.

Stella Creasy: The right hon. Lady will know that I completely agree with everything that she is saying. May I help her by reassuring the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) that her speech is entirely in order in relation to the Bill? Clause 16 not only deals with the promotion of the welfare of children in local authority areas, but requires local authorities to work with the “relevant agencies”, which are those that are exercising functions in relation to children in their areas. That is exactly what schools do, and that is why we need to do this now.

Mrs Miller: I thank the hon. Lady for her helpful intervention.

We sometimes worry about raising the issue of sex and relationships in the House because we feel that we are taking away a primary function of parents, but that is not the way parents see it. Research conducted by YouGov shows that 90% of parents want compulsory SRE because they understand the pressures that their children are under. Those pressures have the potential to undermine the welfare of those children, especially when they are at school. Teachers understand that, too. They understand the importance of helping young people to navigate, in an appropriate way, the pressures of being a teenager in the internet world.
There is overwhelming evidence of the need for change and I make no apology for underlining it today for the Minister’s benefit. Five Select Committee Chairs have made the same point as a result of work that their Committees have done, and the Department for Education itself told the Education Committee that good PSHE underpins good academic achievement. We know that children who have received sex and relationships education and PSHE more broadly are less likely to engage in risky behaviour and much more likely to seek help when things go wrong. Children need to be able to recognise abuse, grooming and predatory behaviour. As Alison Hadley of the University of Bedfordshire told the Education Committee, if children have no “ammunition to understand these things, no wonder they are ending up in very dangerous situations.”

Educating children about this is not an optional extra; it needs to be mandatory and an integral part of the Government’s safeguarding strategy.

In January 2014, in response to the Education Committee’s report, the Government said that they would work to ensure that all schools deliver high-quality PSHE, but 40% still do not. In November 2014, the Government established an expert group for PSHE, which recommended that PSHE should be a statutory entitlement for all pupils. Two years on, can the Minister update the House on the progress that has been made on the issue, which 90% of parents want action on, and which Girlguiding, End Violence Against Women, the NSPCC and Barnardo’s—the list goes on—are calling for action on?

I call on the Minister to put in place a timetable for action, including a comprehensive consultation to ensure that we get this right. No one is calling for rushed measures but, as Members have said, the issue of making SRE compulsory has been ongoing for some time. Of course the education should be age-relevant in all cases, and any proposal should be implemented in a way that brings the whole House together, because that is always the best way to handle such important cross-party issues.

6.11 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I am pleased to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). I very much welcome this debate and the time and focus that this Government are devoting to the outcomes for children who are looked after and to the social work profession. However, I must declare an interest. My sister is a senior practising social worker and, prior to becoming a Member for Parliament, I worked for Supported Fostering Services in a contact supervisor capacity. I am also still connected with that charity as I remain an independent visitor for one of our looked-after children.

I consider myself to be extremely lucky. I was brought up in a safe and loving environment and was given the necessary tools to go out into the big wide world and make my own way. In 2007, via my sister, I got involved for the first time with Supported Fostering Services. That was the first time I had the privilege to meet and work with some of our looked-after children, their families, carers and social workers, and to see at first hand the challenges that our young people and the social work profession face. There has been an increase in children becoming looked after, and some of that has been attributed to the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, representing 6% of the looked-after population. I have also seen at a local level the increase in the number of children in care.

In that environment, it is right that this Government, and society, are putting the outcomes of our young people at the top of the agenda. It is also right that there is a focus on the decisions made about the futures of those young people. In my limited involvement over the past nine years, I have seen some fantastic outcomes for our young people, but far too many disappointing ones—some due to decisions made about their futures and to a lack of understanding of the child and of the use of timely interventions that are best for that child.

One young person who has been in care for over 10 years since the age of four has had to go through unbelievable experiences which even an adult would struggle to cope with—being split from siblings, attending therapy, a failed adoption, time in a therapeutic centre, and number of foster placements and social workers. That young person has amazing strength of character and a resilience that we could only hope to have. Luckily, an amazing placement has now been found and that person will succeed, but it will be in spite of some of the interventions and not solely because of them.

If a young person is ready for adoption by a family that is the perfect match, no one would disagree that adoption for the child should be a major consideration for social services and the courts. Achieving the best outcomes for that young person should be the duty and focus of social services and the courts. Unfortunately, I have seen decisions on adoptions being delayed by too much focus being placed on challenges by the birth parents and on their needs, even after several reports from professionals have recommended a decision. Allowing judgments to be challenged over long periods does not put the interests of the child first.

A social worker once told me that she did not like adoptions and that they made her feel nervous. I asked her why, and she said that the stakes were too high. At the time, I did not know quite what she meant and I thought it rather an odd thing for a social worker to say. However, having subsequently seen the damage that a failed adoption can cause, I finally understand. Relationships with children are like all relationships. We as adults do not like everybody we come into contact with, and it is the same for children. We ask a lot of children and adopters when, after an introduction period of perhaps only two weeks, we put those strangers together and hope that it works out okay. I know that the process is far more complicated than that, but fundamentally we hope that a good relationship will be built after only a short honeymoon period and that the adopters and children will be given the support they need to make it a success.

I have seen children being given the best chance of a great life when their adoption has worked, but once an adoption order has gone through, the support from the agencies stops. The stakes are high with adoption. It should be regarded as the perfect solution, but its success will always be dependent on the individual child, and the use of special guardianships and placements should not be undermined by a focus on adoption.
I welcome the fact that support for care leavers features heavily in the Bill, through the local offer and the extension of personal advisers. This is a major step forward in supporting this vulnerable group of young people as they make the difficult transition from coming out of care to going it alone. Some of our young people have had upbringings and experiences that we would struggle to comprehend. The care system tries to wrap them in a safety blanket, so a child in care can be far less prepared to go it alone without a support network of trusted people giving guidance, or to make decisions for themselves after most decisions have been made for them up to that point.

It is a long outdated view that once a young person reaches 18 or even their early 20s, they do not need any help. I very much welcome the extension of personal advisers to work with our young people to ensure they get access to the services they need, to give them the support they deserve in order for them to succeed, and to put them on the pathway to achieving their full potential. That is great, and I very much welcome it, but will the Minister tell us how this will work in practice? Will personal advisers always be social workers? How will plans for young people leaving care be monitored and evaluated to ensure that this is not just a box-ticking exercise by local authorities, that it provides meaningful help, support and advice to our vulnerable young people and that the personal advisers get to know the young person and truly understand their needs?

The local offer will be extremely important to young people, but we know that due to local authorities’ budget burdens the availability of that support will very much depend on a council’s priorities unless there is a statutory obligation to deliver the services. Investment in our most vulnerable young people at this crucial time in their lives can only bring rewards, and I would like to see high-quality offers from local authorities for our young people.

A high proportion of formerly looked-after children are not in education, employment or training. We also know that leaving care and going it alone can present barriers to prevent a young person from moving forward with their life in a positive way, even though they might think of this time as being exciting and full of hope. However, some of those young people will never have to manage their finances while in care and are therefore much more vulnerable to getting into debt and not being able to manage without the safety net that a family or carer can provide. We must ensure that young people are given all the tools they need to succeed. They deserve to be treated differently in terms of accommodation provision and access to funds so that they are able to move forward and get the best chance to succeed. My constituency contains a young offenders institution and a secure training centre and, sadly, too many of the young people in such institutions were once looked-after children. That is a direct outcome of not only what they experienced growing up, but a lack of support and access to the services they needed as they moved towards adulthood.

My final point relates to social workers. Policemen, doctors, nurses and firemen are public servants, and made to feel proud about what they do. Our society stands behind them and will hear no criticism. However, social workers are often criticised, blamed and singled out when something goes wrong. They put up with a negative dialogue about their profession, including stereotypes and being dismissed as interfering do-gooders. However, our social workers should be held in the highest esteem as professionals who make decisions, intervene to protect children and families from harm, work with families to help them stay together and have an impact on outcomes—day in, day out. They see some of the most terrible situations on a daily basis, including where children are being neglected or physically and mentally abused, and they work with children who have severe, complex disabilities. Social workers do not go into social work for the money; they do it because they want to protect children—often a thankless task.

I remember when my sister was working in a duty team and would struggle to sleep at night as she worried about what was happening within some families after she went home. She feared what she would be presented with when she got into work in the morning. That is not unusual. It is the daily life of a front-line social worker. I welcome the creation of Social Work England, even though the profession has some concerns about the change. Social work is so important and it is right to have a regulator focused on raising standards, good practice and strengthening formal training pathways. However, I spoke to several social workers before today’s debate and, owing to the level of their caseloads, some were not even aware of the Bill.

Social workers carry out a mentally and emotionally demanding job, and I feel that one element has been missed. There is a high burnout rate among front-line social workers and individual social worker caseloads are far too high in some parts of the country, causing some to feel unsafe in their work. For example, a social worker working 40 hours a week with a caseload of 20 would have only two hours a week per case. The casework could involve a mixture of children in need, court cases or child protection, all requiring a different amount of attention in any one week. Some cases require a significant amount of time and yet we expect social workers to know the children and the family and be able to make safe decisions. Such circumstances do not give our professionals the opportunity for thinking space or allow them to carry out the preventive work that many want to do. The nature of their work means that every child and family is different, and social workers innovate every day within the current framework in sometimes challenging circumstances.

In conclusion, everyone in the House should champion outcomes for children, who will go on to become the parents, workers and leaders of the future. It is unacceptable in this century for some of our young people’s future to be predictable based on their past or where they have come from. State intervention must work, and I hope that this Government will continue to push for better outcomes for vulnerable looked-after children.

6.24 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): It was my choice to be last today, so I am very pleased to be speaking now. It is a great honour to follow my very lion. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), who made an excellent speech, and I completely agree with her on the support for adoptive parents; I have a close relative who has adopted three children and it really is not easy, so I completely agree.
I am very pleased with this Bill, and particularly welcome some of its measures, including on decision-making support for looked-after children, and especially the raising of the age of care leavers to 25 in respect of local authority services. I know that young people in their 20s still need looking after, having four of my own in their 20s. There is plenty of evidence to show that the brain does not fully develop until 25, and the state needs to keep its parental responsibility until young people are firmly launched.

In March 2016 there were 70,440 looked-after children in England, and based on the 2016 data there were 26,340 care leavers aged 19, 20 or 21, of whom 40% were not in employment, education or training, compared with 14% of all 19 to 21-year-olds who did not go through the care service. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, 4% of these care leavers end up in the criminal justice system.

The role of the corporate parent is to safeguard the young, but there is a resource aspect to it. Portsmouth children’s services estimates that if a young person is kept out of a single involvement in the criminal justice system, it saves the state £100,000 in various ways, for instance in avoiding the need for probation services, the cost of the criminal justice system and social services for rehabilitation.

I also mentioned the increase in age on Second Reading of the Homelessness Reduction Bill a couple of weeks ago. Many twenty-somethings are still living at home, and therefore we need to look after the housing of our care leavers, too. That protection should follow the care leavers around the country, so, like any other young person, they are looked after by either the local authority where they have settled or their original local authority. I welcome the amendment of the Earl of Listowel for a national offer for care leavers. Independent living is very different from living in the care environment in terms of budgeting and looking for jobs, and there is also the question of setting up home, including dealing with bills and council tax. I hope that the national offer will be accepted and personal advisers are clearly identified.

On social workers, I welcome the establishment of Social Work England as an independent non-departmental public body. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham mentioned, I worked with him on a commission on children’s social workers in 2007, called “No More Blame Game”. Some of the recommendations were adopted—for instance, that of the chief social worker—but the General Social Care Council, which was the regulator, folded in 2012, and the new regulator, the Health and Care Professions Council, looks after many other jobs. It is important that social work is seen as a unique job, and therefore we must recognise that it is a separate profession, on a level with other professionals such as doctors and nurses.

Some of the other recommendations have already been accepted, but I thought it would be a good idea to remind the Minister in case he has not read the report. The first recommendation is that the generic nature of social work must be maintained and resources better targeted to enable social workers to work with families in a preventive role. That is largely happening already. There is also the role of the consultant social worker, which I think is what the sister of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood does. That senior practitioner has been introduced to keep experienced social workers on the front line of care, rather than putting them into management. That requires an appropriate career and pay structure to be put in place to support them, because if they do not want to go into management, there is no other way of going forward.

Thirdly, every social worker should be encouraged and have an opportunity to become a member of a professional body similar to the British Medical Association or Royal College of Nursing, which could advocate on their behalf, negotiate on salaries and conditions of services, provide good public relations on behalf of the profession as a whole, and influence future Government policy. Consideration should also be given to a requirement that employers, including agency employers, fund this membership for the first post-qualifying year to ensure that all entrants to the profession can become members.

We also recommended that there should be a chief social worker—an idea we took from New Zealand, where it works incredibly successfully. This person would work across Departments, and with Unison, the British Association of Social Workers, other representative bodies and, in particular, the media. Again, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood mentioned that the attitude some people take to social work is appalling, because it is an incredibly tough profession. We need to get the media to look at the health of the profession, and provide good news stories and cases. I do not know whether anybody is watching “Damned”, but it shows how hard the profession works, although it is made to be amusing. It would be nice if we could also have positive stories coming out in the media.

Our next recommendation was that the social work degree must continue to be generic to allow social workers a good foundation in all aspects of social work, so that they can get a good grasp of all the different aspects of looking after children in the care service. The content and the length of the degree course might be reviewed, to equip them with the right knowledge and skills for rewarding jobs—I believe that is in the Bill, too. That is beginning to happen. We also considered that the course should extend to four years, so that they have a year out in practice and get a good grasp of what they are getting themselves into.

Our next recommendation was that multi-agency training should be incorporated into the qualifying degree and should continue to be part of continuing professional development. In many professions, be it teaching or medicine, professional development is incredibly important. Social workers need that continued professional development and support throughout their career. We also recommended that the Department of Health and the Department responsible for children’s services work with local authorities and other employers of social workers to ensure that resources, both course fees and replacement time, are available so that all social workers can undertake the level of post-qualifying education and training necessary for the roles and tasks they are employed to undertake. Again, that goes back to the point about continued development.

There should be a combination of a national recruitment campaign and local headhunting to encourage more people to enter social work. As we have heard, there are a lot of vacancies and social workers are incredibly
overworked. It is an incredibly rewarding profession and we need to ensure that we get more people into it, so we need a national recruitment campaign. One way of doing that is through high-impact advertising. Similar to what we see for the Army, the police and teaching, we need to send a clear message that the role of social workers is important in society and should be respected.

Another recommendation was for the establishment of the newly qualified social worker status, which is essential to supporting and retaining inexperienced social workers. Often they were coming out of university and going straight into work in harrowing circumstances and were not getting the support they needed. I hope we will also look at apprenticeships in social work. I know we are doing those in nursing and it would be great if that could extend to social work. Social workers need to have protected caseloads and guaranteed post-qualifying study and training time, so that we retain the social workers we already have. There also needs to be a flexible pay structure that corresponds to those of other similar professions working in multi-agency teams and that recognises the difference in living costs around the country.

We said that the numerical adoption targets and other targets that are not in the best interests of the child should be phased out, and I am pleased that has already been adopted. We also suggested that better targeted funding should go into research and development in social care.

Some of our recommendations have already been accepted, but this very good report is now nearly 10 years old, so if the Minister has not read it I insist that he does so. I ask him to look at anything that we have not done already, with a view to putting it into practice. I hope that the new regulator continues the improvement that has been happening in the social work profession. It is a tough job at the front-line but it is a very rewarding profession. The Government’s closure of Sure Start units and removal of early years help in family support centres, and the disproportionate cuts to local authorities in the most deprived areas have measurably taken their toll. All this Government seem to be doing for desperate families is turning the screw tighter and tighter, year on year, until they break. As other hon. Members have already said, the demand for help and protection is rising.

Over the past 10 years, there has been a 124% increase in serious cases—where a local authority believes that a child may be suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm—and the varied spending on social work has been found to be totally unrelated to quality. In short, all of the Government’s initiatives and changes are not yielding positive results. This is systemic not local failure. In other words, it is the Government’s fault.

Both the National Audit Office and the Education Committee looked into social work reform and noted that there are significant weaknesses in the Government’s agenda, and that the reforms focus on “changing structures potentially to the detriment of the people delivering this key public service.”

I remind the Minister, as I have done many times before, that social work is a holistic profession. The Government’s closure of Sure Start units and removal of early years help in family support centres, and the disproportionate cuts to local authorities in the most deprived areas have measurably taken their toll. All this Government seem to be doing for desperate families is turning the screw tighter and tighter, year on year, until they break. As other hon. Members have already said, the demand for help and protection is rising.

The social work profession needs is continuity, stability and confidence, and a Government who can hold their nerve on how best to help children and families by putting in place and embedding good policies—policies such as the introduction of personal, social, health and economic education, which was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), and supported by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller).

The Government are failing to get the basics right. They are not reducing social worker caseloads, preventing experienced professionals from quitting the profession or training social workers in a holistic way—they are fast-tracking them, and forcing them to specialise before they have even been trained in the basics. The Government are not amending IT and the bureaucratic process across the board to achieve the goal of getting social workers where they want to be, which is out from behind their desks and seeing the families with whom they work. This Bill does nothing to respond to the crisis in social work and to the hundreds of thousands of children who need better services right now.

Like other Members, I wish to take this opportunity to thank the Labour Lords and other peers whose tireless work has resulted in the Bill before us today being markedly different from that which was first introduced. In particular, I wish to congratulate peers on defeating the Government and forcing them to remove dangerous clauses from the Bill that would have paved the way for the privatisation of children’s social care. It is scandalous that these clauses are soon to reappear at Committee stage. The Government’s proposals will allow local authorities, under the guise of innovation, to opt out of protective primary legislation. That legislation,
which has taken decades to achieve, has led to us having one of the safest child protection systems in the world. It was hard fought for by the profession in this place and in the other place. These proposals have caused alarm and outrage in the profession and the sector overall. I have yet to meet a social worker who supports the changes. I have had no clarity from the Minister about where the demand for change has come from and what pieces of primary legislation local authorities and social workers say prevent them from carrying out good social work. Will he tell us today?

This is legislation formed in the worst possible way, without demand and without any evidential basis for fixing the problems it purports to fix. The Government have invented a solution to an invented problem, because the Bill will not solve any of the problems in social work. What I know from my time in social work practice is that the things that social workers find restrictive, such as case recording, derive from secondary legislation, guidance, or the custom and practice in their particular local authority—all of which can be changed without primary legislation.

The Government have denied time and again that the opt-out clauses were about privatisation, yet late last week, two years after it was written and after an inexplicable delay in responding to freedom of information requests, the Department for Education released a report, referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyme (Angela Rayner), which sets out how children’s social care can be moved out of local authority control—a report which states that independent contractors have said that they are willing to play the long game and wait for councils to hand over the majority, if not all, of their children’s social care services after they have developed their experience in children and families social work. There we have it—-independent contractors are going to use vulnerable children and families to experiment with, once the Government allow local authorities to opt out of protective legislation. These are the most dangerous changes to child protection that I have ever seen.

Labour, bolstered by the support of the profession and related stakeholders who have expressed outrage at these plans, will fight the Government every step of the way on these clauses. Vulnerable children are not to be used as market experiments, and any child protection strategy that requires the dispensation of the law to achieve it is counter-productive and downright dangerous.

Of course, there are parts of the Bill that we can support. The introduction of detailed principles of corporate parenting, the extension of the personal adviser role to care leavers up to the age of 25, and the local offer for care leavers are all steps in the right direction. Our concern is whether the Government can deliver it. For example, they promise in the Bill to promote the physical and mental health of looked-after children, but on their watch child and adolescent mental health services are in meltdown, with many looked-after children waiting not just months, but years, for specialist help. Changes need to be properly resourced, otherwise they are warm words and nothing more, so can the Minister confirm that these proposals will be properly resourced?

The Bill establishes a new social work regulator. In Committee we will carefully consider this change and those that relate to local safeguarding boards and the child safeguarding practice review panel. We share some of the concerns of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). We have ongoing concerns about the independence and impact of the proposed non-departmental public body model, especially the lack of detail in the current proposals which envisage Government appointments directly to the leadership of the organisation. Can the Minister please explain why the social work profession is treated so differently from other health and care professions?

Finally, the Bill is impotent in its response to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. These children are experiencing the most immense suffering and trauma. Thanks to Lord Dubs forcing the Government’s hand and reminding them of this crisis, we will see a strategy in May next year, but these are urgent and pressing matters and deserve further debate in this place. We fully support the amendments so eloquently and passionately outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow.

In essence, what we have here is a Bill with some nice-sounding elements that do not appear to be fully resourced, and are therefore not guaranteed, and the continual threat to open up children’s social care to the market by allowing opt-outs from legislation. In fact, we will be presented with a Bill in Committee that local authorities could, in theory, dispense with if it became law. That is a completely ridiculous approach to legislation and an insult to the House.

I know that getting things right for children and families in the social work arena is not an easy task—it is difficult and complex, and many Governments have grappled with it. But trust me, this Bill is not the answer. We will seek significant amendments in Committee and make sure that the Government understand that privatisation and micromanagement are not the answer to every problem. Labour will never allow the Government to use our most vulnerable children as experiments in Tory ideology.

6.45 pm

The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families (Edward Timpson): I begin by thanking hon. Members for their enthusiastic engagement with the issues at the heart of the Bill. We all share a commitment to improving the lives of our most vulnerable children, and that has been demonstrated by the energy shown throughout this debate. As we enter Committee, I look forward to exploring in much more detail aspects of the Bill that have been raised today.

As the Minister for School Standards set out in opening the debate, protecting our most vulnerable children and giving them the care and support they need to thrive is one of the Government’s most important responsibilities. The children who need support from social care services have often faced challenges that most of us can only ever imagine. They have disabilities, they have faced abuse and neglect, or they have been let down time and again by the people who are supposed to love and protect them. They may be being exploited by perpetrators preying on their vulnerability. Children’s social care professionals deal with these highly complex and demanding challenges every day. They step up and take on responsibility for protecting our vulnerable children.

In my time as children’s Minister, as a family barrister and as a foster sibling, I have often been inspired by stories of children whose lives are transformed by social
workers, foster carers, residential care staff, adopters and others. These people epitomise the compassion and deep desire in our society to help others, without which we, and our children, would be so much the poorer.

The Bill we are debating today is a critical part of creating a child’s social care system that enables those people to do the very best job possible for our children. It builds on the Children and Families Act 2014 and takes forward important measures from our overall strategy “Putting children first”—a strategy that I think represents the most fundamental reforms to the system in a generation.

The Bill places the interests of vulnerable children right at the heart of the social care system. It defines what good corporate parenting looks like, and secures the involvement of the whole council in looking out for children in or leaving its care. It requires every local area to set out exactly what support it is offering care leavers, and extends the help of a personal adviser to all care leavers up to the age of 25. It introduces improved national arrangements for analysing serious incidents and learning from them, and strengthened arrangements for local multi-agency co-ordination of safeguarding.

The Bill extends educational support to children leaving care via adoption or special guardianship. It creates the conditions for good placement decisions to be made for children coming into the care system, by ensuring that the child’s long-term needs and the impact of the harm they have suffered are properly considered. Furthermore, it introduces a new, bespoke regulator for social work, Social Work England—an organisation that will be empowered to raise standards in social work and raise the status of that vital profession.

Members have raised a multitude of important points in today’s debate, and I will do my very best to respond to them without detaining the House longer than would be deemed acceptable. I am grateful for the constructive engagement of Members, and want to work together to move forward with these legislative provisions, which have huge potential to improve the life chances of the children we all care so deeply about.

The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), the shadow Secretary of State, asked where our comprehensive strategy for all children in care was. We have it: it is the “Putting children first” document, and I urge her to refresh her memory of that all-encompassing strategy for children in care, which goes through to 2020.

The hon. Lady asked about spending on children’s services. It is right to say that the pattern of inspection outcomes is not about how deprived an area is, the local geography or even the amount of money being spent on children’s social care. Some of the local authorities judged inadequate by Ofsted this year were among the highest spending, while higher performers were found to spend their money more effectively, investing in the best services and bringing costs down. The key here is identifying where investment makes a difference, and spreading knowledge and practice about what works.

The hon. Lady asked about the local offer and about what guidance there would be for local authorities. The legislation already sets out the areas where local authorities should provide advice in England—healthy well being, education and training, employment, accommodation, participation in society, and relationships. We expect a wide range of services to be covered, from relevant universal health

 provision, to careers advice, to specific financial support, which care leavers can access and will benefit from. We have also developed a prototype local offer that sets out the areas we expect local authorities to consider and that provides examples of more specific support a local authority may choose to offer, and I am happy to share that with the hon. Lady so that she can scrutinise it in more detail.

The hon. Lady asked about the independence of the new regulator—Social Work England. The Bill makes it clear that Social Work England will be a separate legal entity, with its own staff and set of responsibilities as a non-departmental public body. The Government have always been clear that they have no intention to make decisions about individual social workers, and that is reflected in the legislation.

The Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), made some central points about the foundations of the Bill, which he welcomed, and that included the regulatory changes. He raised the issue of a professional body for social work, and I agree that it is absolutely important for the profession to have a strong body to represent it, to provide support and guidance, and to help it develop its own practice. I set out at the national children and adult social services conference a few weeks ago exactly how I want to work with the profession to make sure we come up with the right solution. We have tried a whole host of different ways of making these things work, and we now need to go further to make sure we have something that will endure long into the future.

My hon. Friend alluded to Trafford, one of the outstanding care-leaving services in England, and to the virtue of its having strong leadership. I agree with him, and I have been hugely impressed by the work that has been done there by Mark Riddell and his team. There is a lot they can show others in terms of what works.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) told us to look at the work in Scotland. I am always happy to look at the Scottish perspective. As ever, I invite her to look at what we are doing in England, too. She said Scotland has children at the heart of the system; so do we—if she looks at the “Putting children first” strategy document, she will see that. Although Scotland may lead the way in some areas, we lead the way in others—Staying Put being a good example.

The hon. Lady asked why local authorities are only too happy to regard corporate parenting principles. The reason for that is that the local authority is the corporate parent and is legally responsible for looked-after children and care leavers. We believe that maintaining this clear accountability is right. There is an existing duty under section 10 of the Children Act 2004 in terms of who the key partners are, and they include health, police, education services and others. The intention is that the provisions will help to improve the response in terms of them carrying out the duties they already have set out in legislation.

The hon. Lady asked about the Government’s commitment to the UN convention on the rights of the child. The Government remain fully committed to protecting children’s rights and to the UNCRC. We have considered the concluding observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and we responded through the written ministerial statement published in October and through the permanent secretary’s
letter to his counterparts across Government. The Bill is an example of how we constantly seek to not only protect children’s rights but enhance them. A full child rights impact assessment was conducted during the development of the Bill. There was considerable debate in the Lords on this issue, and we recently reaffirmed our commitment, through the written ministerial statement, to reinforcing the message of the importance of the UNCRC across every Department and to making sure there is a proactive approach to considering children’s rights in policy making.

I will do my utmost to address all the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). I do join him and my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) in praising the incredible work and dedication of our social work workforce—something that was reiterated by the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck). Children’s and adults’ social workers do a fantastic job, which is so difficult, day in, day out.

I agree that the administrative burdens on social workers—sitting in front of computers filling in forms—has hampered much of the progress of social work. I have read on several occasions the report, “No More Blame Game”, which my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham was instrumental in producing. The whole purpose of the changes we are making to the serious case review process is to get away from pointing the finger and to look at where things have gone wrong, why they have gone wrong and how we make sure that it does not happen again in future.

My hon. Friend set out some of the highlights of the Government’s reform programme in children’s social care over the past six years, mentioning Staying Put as one of those. I can inform him that there has been an exceptional response to this, with 54% of 18-year-olds, 30% of 19-year-olds and 16% of 20-year-olds now choosing to stay put. Of course, however, we keep the mechanism under review to ensure that it will continue to benefit more children and young people in future.

My hon. Friend talked about some of the deficiencies in the system, including in sharing best practice. Again, I agree. That is why we are setting up a What Works centre for children’s social care that will build a robust evidence base, and disseminate learning about what does and does not work in children’s social care practice, in order to help local practitioners and commissioners to employ the most cost-effective front-line practices to support children. Crucially, it will work closely with the child safeguarding practice review panel to ensure that practice developments identified through reviews are also widely disseminated.

On adoption, I share my hon. Friend’s pride in the work of this Government to try to improve the adoption process for prospective adopters and, crucially, for children. The number of children being adopted has risen to over 5,000 per year, and they are being adopted more quickly. On the back of the Re B-S judgment, however, there has been a disappointing fall in those numbers, and we are seeking to do all we can to address that so that we do not lose the ground that we made up in the early years of this Government. Over 10,000 families have benefited directly from the adoption support fund, which was also mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). Although we reluctantly had to put in a fair access limit in the short term to enable more families, wherever at all possible, to benefit from the fund, we want to try to find a sustainable solution so that we can continue this support in the long term. I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend to look at the particular case she raised, as it may exemplify some of the wider issues we need to look at in getting the decision right.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham asked whether the corporate parenting principles are additional to section 23 of the Children Act 1989. This is not about trying to put new duties on local authorities, as the duties are already very clearly set out. We are trying to engender a whole-council approach with councils taking responsibility for children and their care, and having regard to the principles in any decisions they make on their behalf.

Although we are extending the use of personal advisers, I concur with my hon. Friend that there is a whole range of quality and access for care leavers to personal advisers. That is why we are conducting a review of both those issues to make sure that the scope of what a personal adviser is there to do, and the types of people who become personal advisers, together with the training that they get, really matches the needs of care leavers in the way that they have told us they desperately want.

My hon. Friend raised some drafting issues and details around the additional support for education of children in care. I will look at that carefully, and I am sure we will address those issues in Committee.

On serious case reviews, I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Friend about the need for transparency. We worked hard in opposition on the issue of their publication. I remember substituting for him on “Newsnight” to talk about this very subject. We now need to make sure that the new system reflects this important element of an approach that will provide us with a shining light on where practice has fallen short.

My hon. Friend asked about active participation in new local safeguarding arrangements, including financial contributions. That is an important part of the new system and we will set out in more detail, in guidance, how we expect to engender such an approach. He also made a clear pitch for where we should go next with the power to innovate. I will talk about that at the end of my speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) asked about cases of mothers who have repeat pregnancies. He should know that we will spend a total of about £11 million until 2020 on the Pause project, which has been extremely successful in trying to break that cycle, helping mothers find a different path through their lives and reducing the number of children coming into the care system.

The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) talked about the need to concentrate on prevention, which has to be at the heart of any decision about where money should be spent, and where policy should be moving to. A number of other hon. Members also talked about sex and relationships education, and I will come to that subject towards the end of my speech.

On child refugees, the hon. Lady referred to my written statement on the safeguarding strategy across Government. I am grateful for her support for it, but
queried how it sits alongside the Home Office guidance. I will look carefully at what she has said and talk to Home Office Ministers. The Home Office has published guidance setting out the eligibility criteria for children to be transferred to the UK from Calais. Those criteria are: all children aged 12 or under; all children referred to us by the French authorities who are assessed as being at high risk of sexual exploitation; and those nationalities most likely to qualify for refugee status in the UK aged 15 or under. As the Dubs amendment makes clear, children transferred should be refugees, and the best interests of the child are also established in every case as part of the process. The hon. Lady will appreciate that we have to have a method to ensure that those children who are at greatest risk are prioritised. I am happy to discuss the matter further with her, in conjunction with my colleagues at the Home Office.

Stella Creasy: Does the Minister acknowledge that that guidance explicitly sets out nationality before the best interests of the child and, further, that it identifies particular nationalities, thereby ignoring, for example, the Oromo and Afghan children who are currently in France, a third of whom have now gone missing because of the gap that it has caused? I appreciate the Minister’s offer to look carefully at the situation, but will he look at it speedily as well, because we are very worried about those children in the run-up to Christmas and the cold in France?

Edward Timpson: I am happy to do that. Like the hon. Lady, I do not want to create conditions that are counterproductive to our shared mission. I will make sure that acknowledgment of the further work that needs to be done is as rapid as possible and that we progress in a way that does not create more difficulties, but that brings about positive solutions.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke mentioned the adoption case in her constituency. I am happy to discuss that further with her. We need to move to a more sustainable approach, but the adoption support fund has shown that there was a real need for that additional therapeutic support. As the Minister with responsibility for children, I am committed to doing what we can to continue to do that into the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) spoke of her enduring experience of many issues touched on by the Bill. In particular, she raised delays in the adoption process, and I agree with much of what she said. She will be pleased to know that the average time that it takes for a child to get through the adoption system has reduced to 18 months—a reduction of four months from its peak—but more work needs to be done, because every month that goes by is one that the child will never get back. More children are receiving that adoption support and I know that my hon. Friend will ensure that that message gets through to families in her own area who may not yet realise that it is available. She was also clear that the new provisions for care leavers are a major step forward, but I acknowledge that we need to make sure that social workers and personal advisers have the necessary tools to make the most of those changes.

I am grateful for the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South for our measures to improve the support for care leavers. She raised the issue of a national offer. I have met the relevant Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions to see what further practical action we can take, and I will be able to allude to that in more detail in Committee. I take her point on social worker training, which is very much behind the work that we are doing on the assessment and accreditation process to make sure that we raise standards in social work wherever possible.

The hon. Member for South Shields and I get on very well, but I agreed with very little of what she had to offer this afternoon. She questioned the value that we place on the experience and expertise of social workers, but I have to say to her that that is exactly what this Bill is about. I ask her to look more widely at the work that the Government are doing, such as the innovation programme, where we have already spent more than £100 million. That money has gone directly to local authorities to test new ways of working, and there will be another £200 million up to 2020. That £300 million of value has been put directly into improving children’s services.

When the hon. Lady started her speech, I felt as though she was determined to try to turn the debate into some sort of ideological struggle on many of the issues. I do not think she wanted to do that, but we seemed to be moving in that direction. I understand her desire to oppose and to be seen to oppose, but I hope that when we get into Committee, we can have a constructive debate about what is in the Bill and how it fits into the wider Government programme. I do not doubt that we have a shared desire to improve outcomes for vulnerable children. I have a pragmatic streak running through me; I am not some ideologue who will sit here and create a wall of noise. I want to hear the hon. Lady’s argument, but I want her to hear mine, too.

The hon. Lady raised the LauingBuissijn report, but I note that she failed to share with the House the official Government response to that report, which states that “we disagree with the option in the report relating to the privatisation of children’s social care services and we will not be implementing this option.”

We could not be clearer about our position.

I want briefly to talk about the power to innovate, which has generated the most debate. Several hon. Members have raised questions about the power to innovate, a provision that was removed from the Bill in the other place, and which my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards referred to at the opening of the debate. We intend to revisit those powers, because of the important role that they stand to play in improving the quality of children’s social care. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke for her support in explaining that new ways of working are a means of driving improvement in practice.

Whenever I visit local authorities and speak to front-line social workers—I am obviously not meeting the same ones as the hon. Member for South Shields—I am always struck by the passion, energy and dedication that they bring to their work. Too often, though, I leave with a message that, rather than helping them in their task, the structures and processes that we have put in place prevent social workers from using their professional judgement to truly respond to the needs of the children they look after.

As Professor Eileen Munro’s landmark review of child protection told us, over-regulation can get in the way of social workers’ ability to put children first.
The power will address that challenge, and it is being called for by local authorities around the country. It will give councils the ability to test new ways of working that are designed to improve outcomes for children in a safe and controlled environment, where the impact of removing a specific requirement can be measured and evaluated carefully.

That is not to say that important points have not been raised in the House and in the other place. I have considered them all carefully and I will continue to do so, and I will bring back a power with significant changes and additional safeguards that will, I hope, provide the reassurances that have been requested.

I want to be clear: we do not want to privatise protection services for children. We will not privatise child protection services. There are already clear legislative restrictions on the outsourcing of children’s social care functions, and it was never our intention to use the power to innovate to revisit those. To put that beyond doubt, however, we tabled clarificatory amendments in the other place.

Neither will we remove fundamental rights or protections from children. Our aim is to strengthen, not to weaken, protections. My mission—since entering this House and before—has always been to improve the lives of vulnerable children. It is our job as a Government to create the conditions in which excellent practice can flourish. I am convinced that with proper safeguards in place, the ability to pilot new approaches will, in the long term, allow this House to enact more effective, evidence-based legislation and drive wider improvement for our most innovative practitioners and services across the system.

I agreed with Professor Eileen Munro when she said:

“I welcome the introduction of the power to innovate set out in the Children and Social Work Bill. This is a critical part of the journey set out in my Independent Review of Child Protection towards a child welfare system that reflects the complexity and diversity of children’s needs.

“Trusting professionals to use their judgement rather than be forced to follow unnecessary legal rules will help ensure children get the help they need, when they need it. Testing innovation in a controlled way to establish the consequences of the change...is a sensible and proportionate way forward.”

I ask hon. Members, before casting a final judgment on the power to innovate, to consider the amendments that we intend to table, which I believe provide that “sensible and proportionate” approach, built on the clear and single purpose of improving the outcomes of vulnerable children.

Finally, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud and the hon. Member for Walthamstow spoke powerfully about sex and relationships education. I, too, recognise its importance. Of course, the Government already issue statutory guidance on the teaching of sex and relationships, and have made funding available to improve the quality of that teaching. However, I have heard the call to go further in this area to build the resilience and confidence of children and young people in tackling what the modern world throws at them, not least online. This is, of course, a topic on which there are many—many, and strongly held, views and it will be important to look at those in the round, not least because PSHE and SRE are inextricably linked.

This matter is a priority for the Secretary of State, so I have already asked officials to advise me further on it, but I will ask them to accelerate that work so that I can report on our conclusions at a later point in the Bill’s passage, when everyone in the House will be able to look at them and have their say.

I am sure that these reflections only start to do justice to the range of important issues we have debated here today. I look forward to picking up these matters in greater detail as the Bill moves into Committee. I see the contents of the Children and Social Work Bill as a major step forward in making sure that our most vulnerable children get the levels of support, protection and opportunity that any of us would want for our own children. I welcome the debate and challenge we have engaged in this afternoon—it helps to maintain the momentum behind what is a shared endeavour across these Houses. We are all united in our commitment to improving the lives of our most vulnerable children. Please let me leave the House in no doubt that I recognise and accept the challenges we face. This Government are more determined than ever to rise to those challenges, with our clear and ambitious plan for fundamentally reforming the system. Our vulnerable children deserve no less. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

CHILDREN AND SOCIAL WORK BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Children and Social Work Bill [Lords]:

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee
(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 17 January 2017.

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

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

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

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

Other proceedings
(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of any message from the Lords) may be programmed.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.
CHILDREN AND SOCIAL WORK BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

Question's recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Children and Social Work Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by a Minister of the Crown, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.

CHILDREN AND SOCIAL WORK BILL [LORDS] (WAYS AND MEANS)

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Children and Social Work Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

ADJOURNMENT (EASTER, MAY DAY AND WHITSUN)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 30 March 2017, do adjourn until Tuesday 18 April 2017; at its rising on Thursday 27 April 2017, do adjourn until Tuesday 2 May 2017; and at its rising on Thursday 25 May 2017, do adjourn until Monday 5 June 2017.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.

DEFENCE COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Jim Shannon be discharged from the Defence Committee and Gavin Robinson be added.—(Jackie Doyle-Price, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Ian Paisley and Gavin Robinson be discharged from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and Mr Gregory Campbell and Jim Shannon be added.—(Jackie Doyle-Price, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Gill Furniss be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Tracy Brabin be added.—(Jackie Doyle-Price, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

Terminal Illness: Support

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

7.14 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It is appropriate that this debate, on an issue that will touch millions of people and their families at some point in their lives, should take place today, given that 5 December has been designated International Volunteer Day by the United Nations since 1985. Its purpose is to “celebrate the power and potential of volunteerism”.

The UN states that IVD is “an opportunity for volunteers, and volunteer organisations, to raise awareness of, and gain recognition for; the contribution they make to their communities”.

This year’s IVD theme of #GlobalApplause seeks to give volunteers around the world the recognition they deserve, while also “giving a hand” to potential volunteers by encouraging them to give up some of their time for others.

Of course, the link between IVD and this debate is that the vast majority of end-of-life palliative care outside hospital is provided by the charitable sector and only partly funded by the NHS. For that reason, people who donate their money to—and, crucially, their time through volunteering with—end-of-life-care charities play an immeasurably important role in ensuring that the majority of us, and our loved ones, will get the right care and support when we are dying. We will need more volunteers as more people die each year and the demand for high-quality palliative and end-of-life care increases, which is something I will return to later.

I have long been an advocate of the need for good palliative care and support to be available to those who need it, but it is as a result of my recent work locally with the charity Marie Curie that I sought this debate. As I am sure all hon. Members will know, Marie Curie has been providing care and support for people living with terminal illness and their families for the last 65 years. It was able to care for more than 40,000 people across the UK in the last year alone, in large part thanks to the support of more than 10,000 volunteers.

In October, I had the absolute privilege of meeting my constituent Don Lowther, who has terminal cancer, and Faye Morrison, a 21-year-old student from Gateshead who has befriended Don through Marie Curie’s helper service. This pioneering service, which has been available in the Tyne and Wear area since last year, matches trained volunteers with people living with terminal illnesses, providing them and their loved ones with companionship, emotional support and practical help with the aim of ensuring that their quality of life is the best it can be in its final stages.

Since last December, Faye has been making regular visits to see Don in his home, and over that time they have developed a close friendship. Faye is able to ensure that Don, who can no longer drive, can still get out of the house to places such as North Shields for fish and chips. Perhaps most importantly, Faye is a non-family member who Don can talk to and share his concerns with. The impact of Faye’s volunteering on Don’s quality of life, and that of his wife’s, is clear to anyone who...
meets them, but Faye is the first to say that she has—from giving her time and being part of the helper service—gained as much as Don has.

The Marie Curie helper service also helps to co-ordinate local services, enabling people affected by a terminal illness and their families to understand what is happening, and ensuring that they are supported throughout this challenging journey. In the case of Faye and Don, this has involved signposting Don to the services provided by Marie Curie’s Newcastle hospice, which I also heard more about from Lead Nurse Michelle Scott when I recently visited this facility, which is located in the west end of the city in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah).

I saw for myself the newly opened complementary therapy and relaxation area, with its Alnwick garden theme, and the different types of accommodation available to patients and their carers, including for respite care. I learned more about the wide range of medical and nursing care, physiotherapy and occupational therapy available, and about the practical, psychological, emotional and spiritual support provided by the highly experienced hospice team. What I took away most from my visit, however, was the hospice’s absolute dedication to celebrating life and to ensuring that those using its services—whether terminally ill parents with young children or those, such as my constituent Don, who use their day services and activities—receive the best possible support and enjoy the best possible quality of life as their time comes to an end. Don told me he was concerned that once he stepped inside the hospice, he would never leave, but that is just not the case. Thanks to the helper service and Faye, he was signposted to the care and support provided at all stages of terminal illness. That support is not negative about death and dying, but treats them as a part of life. Of course, not all Marie Curie’s nursing care takes place in a hospice setting, because the charity’s nurses also provide overnight care in people’s own homes.

Marie Curie is certainly not the only charitable organisation providing end-of-life care in the Newcastle area. Other vital organisations include Macmillan Cancer Support, with whom I recently had the pleasure of enjoying coffee and cake at the Lemington Centre and St Cuthbert’s Primary School in W albottle, as well as St Oswald’s hospice in Gosforth, which has worked to “make the most of time and improve quality of life for everyone in the North East living with an incurable condition, and their families” for the past 30 years.

Despite the incredible efforts of these charities and the NHS for people who are dying, the risk that they will not get the care that they need to manage their symptoms and to maintain their quality of life until the end of their life is worryingly high. Research undertaken last year by the London School of Economics on behalf of Marie Curie found that a deeply concerning 92,000 people who need palliative care in England each year are not receiving it. That means that one in four people are not getting the good end-of-life care—care for managing pain and other symptoms, alongside psychological, social and spiritual support—that they clearly need.

The people who miss out most frequently on this support are those with a terminal illness other than cancer, such as heart failure or chronic pulmonary disease. Indeed, written evidence submitted by the National Council for Palliative Care to the Health Committee’s inquiry into end-of-life care, which was published last year, drew attention to the fact that people with cancer access over 75% of specialist palliative care services, although cancer causes around 30% of all deaths. Concerns about the availability of palliative care for people with non-cancer diagnoses have been raised with me by a constituent living with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.

Others who are likely to miss out are people aged over 85, including those with dementia, despite the fact that dementia is now identified as the leading cause of death in England and Wales. Written evidence submitted by Age UK to the same Health Committee inquiry highlighted that while one third of all deaths are of people aged over 85, only around 15% of the people who gain access to specialist palliative care fall into that age group. Worrying inequalities already exist regarding the quality of end-of-life support available, depending on a person’s illness, age and, as ever, where they happen to live.

A growing concern is that the existing system, which is already unable to provide care for all who need it, is coming under even greater pressure as our social care services fast approach breaking point. Marie Curie states that in its own services, it is seeing people waiting weeks in hospitals and hospices for social care packages to be put in place so that they can get home or into a care home to spend their final days in the place of their choosing. Very sadly, that situation means that it is not uncommon for people to die while waiting. This does, of course, have a terrible human impact, not only on the person dying, but on their families, making what is already a hugely traumatic situation immeasurably worse. This state of affairs is also totally cost-inefficient for our NHS, which could be using those hospital beds for people who need acute care.

The situation I have outlined will come as no surprise to any hon. Member, given that adult social care budgets have been cut by some £4.6 billion, or 31% in real terms, since 2011. They continue to fall in the face of an increasingly elderly population and therefore increasing demand. I have no doubt that the Minister will want to champion the social care council tax precept that the Government have allowed local authorities to raise for this purpose, but I gently remind him that that is anticipated to raise £1.4 million a year in Newcastle, yet the city council faces a social care shortfall of some £15 million.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this issue to the House’s attention. She is making a powerful speech. Let me also pay tribute to the hospices in my constituency—St Peter’s hospice, and the hospice that cared for my father and my mother-in-law in their dying days.

Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the fact that the Government have not made adequate progress in meeting the recommendations of last year’s inquiry into end-of-life care by the Health Committee? Will she join me in asking the Minister to explore the question of how well the five principles of end-of-life care are being followed across the country?
Catherine McKinnell: I think that we would all like the Minister to try to explain that key point. Marie Curie’s main concern, which I know is shared throughout the sector, is that the provision of palliative care is simply not growing to meet the demand for services. That is clearly extremely troubling, given that one in four people are already unable to access the end-of-life care and support that they need. Like the rest of our health and social care services, the palliative and end-of-life care sector—including those who provide such care in hospitals and care homes—is facing a demographic crisis. More people are dying each year, at an older age, and with more long-term and often complex conditions. Indeed, the number of deaths per year will rise by 100,000 over the next five years.

Given those facts, when the Government announced in July this year in their “response to the independent review of choice in end of life care” that they would establish a board within NHS England to implement the recommendations of the review, it came as a grave disappointment to all involved in the sector that they had chosen to reject the review’s key recommendation that £130 million of funding should be made available at the next spending review to “invest in social care and NHS-commissioned services, to deliver a national choice offer in end of life care.”

Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and, I am sure, others who are listening to the debate, I ask the Minister to state clearly how, without the additional funding that was recommended by the independent review, the Government will ensure that palliative and social care services grow to meet existing and increased demand in the coming years.

Thangam Debbonaire: Does my hon. Friend agree that the autumn statement provided an ideal opportunity for the Government to produce sums to meet the ever-increasing demand for social and end-of-life care, and that that opportunity was missed?

Catherine McKinnell: That is a good point. Everyone was disappointed not to hear a commitment from the Government. I think we would all like to know how, without those additional funds, the Government will end the distressing and unacceptable circumstances in which 92,000 people—one in four—are missing out each year on the care and support that they and their families need at the end of their lives, and how on earth the Government will prevent that deeply concerning figure from growing ever bigger.

I am acutely conscious that there are many more issues that I could have raised in a debate about such an important issue. They include the provision of end-of-life care for children and young people with life-shortening conditions, which, according to the charity Together for Short Lives, is often “inappropriately coupled with the palliative care needs of adults, when their needs can be much more complex”.

A key concern for that charity, and for all of us, is that the number of children and young people affected by life-shortening conditions is not properly monitored, which makes it impossible for the Government, the NHS and local authorities to plan properly and budget for their needs.

Another serious issue relates to the fact that our welfare system can let down too many people with debilitating and terminal conditions such as motor neurone disease. While welcoming the recent and long-overdue announcement that people with severe lifetime conditions will no longer have to undergo reassessments for employment and support allowance, the Motor Neurone Disease Association and many other charities remain extremely concerned about the Government’s determination to devolve attendance allowance to local authorities, and the impact that that could have on the vital support that people with extremely challenging conditions currently receive.

I have raised a number of issues with the Minister this evening about the additional funds for end-of-life care that the NHS, charities and their much-needed volunteers clearly need. When people do not have the palliative care that they need, there are real and damaging consequences. They may die in pain or discomfort, which causes distress not just to them, but to their families, friends and loved ones. That will be avoidable if the Government can make a commitment to those people. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to the important concerns that I have outlined this evening.

7.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on bringing this debate to the House. This is an important subject and it is good that we have the chance to talk about it.

It is also good, as the hon. Lady said, that we are debating it on the UN’s International Volunteer Day. She reminded the House, if it needed reminding, how much of the palliative care burden is taken up by volunteers. We should all reflect on the fact that there are 6 million informal carers in this country. Without those people, things would be much more difficult. We have a carers strategy coming out in the next few months, which I will discuss during my speech.

The hon. Lady talked about her hospice, the work that the Marie Curie charity does there and the helper service it has pioneered in Newcastle. I am happy to acknowledge the fantastic work that hospices do. I have one in my constituency, St Rocco’s, which also does brilliant work. The hon. Lady used a good phrase: we should recognise that at their best hospices celebrate life. That is important.

The Government’s position is that high-quality, end-of-life care, reflecting individual needs, choices and preferences, should be available to everyone. That is our objective; that is what we are working to achieve. Much is being done, despite perhaps the tone of the hon. Lady’s remarks. However, of course there is more to do: more can always be done. This is not something that will ever be finished, but I want to set the context in which we are working.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister has rightly acknowledged, as has the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), the importance of charities and the work that they do. In his response to the points that she has made, will he say what the Government intend to do for young carers
who look after those who are at the end of life? I am aware of the pressure on those young carers given their age, and their ability to cope with the life-changing event that will happen to them and their family very shortly. We need something for them, Minister. Can I make a plea for them?

David Mowat: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is right. There are about a quarter of a million informal carers under the age of 25, half of whom are under the 16-to-18 age range. There are issues for education and future employment. The carers strategy is addressing that and I will have more to say about that.

On the context, 480,000 people in England die every year. Thirty-six per cent. of those are over 85 and about 350,000 of those deaths are expected, in the sense that they are not a surprise. Roughly half that number get some specialist palliative care as part of the pathway. The hon. Lady talked about that not being enough, and I will come back to that. Forty-seven per cent. die in hospital, which is an improvement: 57% of people were dying in hospital 10 years ago. There is an emphasis—the charities, particularly Macmillan, are offering a lead on this—on ensuring that fewer people die in hospital.

In terms of authoritative evidence of how that is working—the hon. Lady mentioned some of the points made by Marie Curie—the Office for National Statistics conducts a yearly survey called “Bereaved VOICES”, which looks at how carers and bereaved people evaluate the last three months of the end-of-life care for their loved ones. About 75% of those services are regarded as good, excellent or outstanding. Ten per cent. are regarded as poor. Ten per cent. is 48,000 deaths a year, and that is still too high. Nevertheless, 75% of those services are regarded as good, excellent or outstanding. The highest proportion of those services are in hospices. Care homes rated about the same as hospices, with hospitals doing less well. The figures are patchy; however, and that is generally linked to deprivation. They are not as good in areas of relatively high deprivation as they are in other areas. That is partly because hospice availability is somewhat skewed by the fact that the charities that run them tend to operate in more affluent areas.

The hon. Lady mentioned the need for spiritual and emotional attention at the end of life, and I can tell her that 70% of those who responded to the survey regarded their loved ones as having received good or outstanding spiritual or emotional care. That reflects well on those in the voluntary sector and the NHS who provide that care, and we should acknowledge that.

I do not wish to sound complacent, because I acknowledge that things could and should be better. I have had this job for four or five months, and there are very few of the areas I cover in which the UK could be said to be the best in the world. Let us take cancer outturns as an example. We know that our one-year survival rates for most types of cancer are worse than those of most other countries in Europe. Last year, however, the Economist Intelligence Unit compiled a quality of death index, which evaluated 50 or 60 countries in the world against a number of criteria, and the UK came top in end-of-life care. As I have said, I do not know the situation across all the areas for which I am responsible, but we should acknowledge this finding. To put it into context, Germany came seventh, France came 10th and Sweden came 16th. That has been achieved through the work of people in charities and in the NHS, but we must also acknowledge that things could be better.

The hon. Lady spoke about social care funding—although that is a slightly different area—and about delayed transfers of care and all that results from them. I have acknowledged many times in the Chamber that social care funding is under pressure because of delayed transfers of care, or bed-blocking, if we want to use that term. However, in terms of adult social care, if we compare the top 10% of councils with the bottom 10%, we see that there is a factor of 30 times in the difference between their performance in delayed transfers of care. That is not related to budgets; it is related to best practice, leadership and all that goes with that. We are sometimes quick to say that money is always the issue, but although that is of course part of it, it is not the only issue. It is important to understand that other factors are involved. Among other areas that need to be improved, we need to continue our drive to ensure that more people do not receive their end-of-life care in hospitals, where they generally do not wish to be. We should also acknowledge that there can be non-uniform commissioning among clinical commissioning groups, and we can do better in that regard as well.

The hon. Lady talked about the choice review, which was produced in 2014 by the National Council for Palliative Care, helped by Macmillan and Marie Curie. It contained some 62 recommendations. The Government’s response came out in July—it was one of the last acts of my predecessor—in the form of a five-point charter. In it, we accepted that we would have personalised care plans in place by 2020, that everyone was entitled to an honest discussion about their end-of-life care and to support in making informed choices, that family and carers would be involved in those choices, and that all people going through an end-of-life process would have an identified contact at all times.

Those elements will need to be implemented right across NHS processes, technologies and pathways, and we have set up the end-of-life care board under Bruce Keogh, the chief medical officer, to oversee that. All arm’s length bodies will be represented on the board. This has not yet been published—it is my role to ensure that it is—but the requirement now is to turn the commitments in the review response into tangible milestones, deliverables and responsibilities. I recently met several members of the End of Life Care Coalition and undertook to have a transparent process so that between 2016 and 2020 we know what we are implementing and when and how that is being done. It is important that that happens. We are extremely committed to it—it is a Government priority. We could do things better as a country, but we do pretty well and we need to do this to make things even better.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Minister for his responses to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). On that point about the plan for between 2016 and 2020, given that the last days of someone’s life are etched into the memories of those who are left behind—I can remember every single moment of the day 23 years ago yesterday when I lost my father—I am responsible, but we should acknowledge this finding. To put it into context, Germany came seventh, France came 10th and
David Mowat: That is a very reasonable request. That intervention was not quite what I was expecting, but it is entirely reasonable and I will commit to do that either in debates such as this or at Question Time, or whenever. I am unsure whether a statement would be appropriate, but it is a reasonable thing to request of a Minister and I am happy to do it. I will at least write to the hon. Lady on the process, because I am determined that the programme of work will be transparent and meaningful with clear deliverables that achieve what we need to achieve.

In addition to implementing the choice review, other ongoing and day-to-day work needs to happen. The Liverpool care pathway was pretty much supplanted last year by the five priorities for dying people that were mentioned in an earlier intervention. We are trying to embed those things within the structure of the NHS. They exist in training programmes, in Health Education England, and in the choices that people make when working in this sector. It is not rocket science; the priorities relate to sensitive communication, the need for individual plans covering food and drink, and also spiritual things for those who need or want them. Fundamental to all this—it should not really need saying—is that the dying person is involved in all aspects.

We put end-of-life care as a priority in the NHS mandate. Clinical commissioning groups must commission end-of-life and bereavement care, and there are NICE guidelines for that. That does not mean that it is not patchy, as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North said, but those are the requirements. When the CQC evaluates care homes, hospitals and hospices, it specifically looks at end-of-life care, and those that want high rankings will need to address such things and work effectively.

I talked about milestones. One important initiative that I expect to come out of the choice review is electronic palliative care records, through which care plans are accessible to the many different workers who need access. I recently saw that happen in London, where the system is called “Coordinate My Care”. The idea is that if a person is in need of an ambulance or paramedic, the paramedic will have access to the care record on the way to the call-out. The record might explain that the person may not want to go to hospital, depending on the issue, and such decisions will become embedded in the process, which is important and good. I want that technology to be rolled out as quickly as possible.

Catherine McKinnell: I was concerned at the beginning of the Minister’s remarks that he sounded complacent about this issue, but he does certainly seem committed to making this review work over the next few years. Will he just acknowledge that if the NHS is not able to get the support from the social care sector and is not able to utilise the funding required, it will fail in its efforts? It will fail unless the funding is there within the community sector and the NHS itself in order to achieve what the Minister sets out as a very important strategy going forward.

David Mowat: I am getting towards the end of my speaking time, so I will finish by answering that as best I can. Of course money matters, and every process works better if there is plenty of money for it. The facts of the matter are that both adult social care and the NHS are under cost pressures. To be honest, that will always be the case in every system, and I just gently say to the hon. Lady that she may be surprised to know that we spend about a third more on adult social care, which is a particular responsibility of mine, than either France or Germany.

Catherine McKinnell: The Minister acknowledged that the challenge in addressing this issue properly is often the patchwork nature of services in our country and the postcode lottery. He also acknowledged that some of the areas that fare the worst are the most deprived, and they are also the areas facing the biggest cost pressures in terms of social care funding. Will he acknowledge that something needs to be done to ensure that that does not undermine these efforts?

David Mowat: This is not the autumn statement, and I cannot make commitments on funding other than to say that many Members on both sides of this Chamber would like to see, when the time is right, more funding for our vital public services. I again just gently make the point to the hon. Lady that we spend considerably more on adult social care than countries such as France and Germany, those it would be reasonable to compare us with, and it is not just about money in terms of the delayed transfers of care performance of different councils—it is hugely different.

Let us agree that what really is important is that over the next few years we implement the choice review: what is important is the Government’s commitment to implement that and our clear intent, as signalled by Bruce Keogh leading the implementation board, that we will be held accountable for it. I will be held accountable for it, and I will report back to the House in due course on that.

I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important issue. Question put and agreed to.

7.47 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

The Secretary of State was asked—

PRISON SAFETY

1. Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve safety in prisons.

[907674]

Elizabeth Truss: First, may I welcome my hon. Friend back to the House? It is great to see her back on our Benches looking so fit and well.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Radiant!

Elizabeth Truss: Indeed. Finally, I can agree with a comment from the Opposition.

My hon. Friend is right to highlight the issue of self-harm and suicides in our prison. The rates are too high, which is why we are taking steps to increase the number of prison officers. We will have a dedicated officer for every six prisoners and they will be responsible for those prisoners’ welfare and for helping them to turn their lives around so that they do not go back to reoffending.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The suicide rate in our prisons is the highest it has ever been in 25 years. It is absolutely shameful. Just the other week, the Health Secretary appeared before the Health Committee and admitted that he has never visited a prison mental health service. Will the Secretary of State tell us whether she has visited one, and if not, why not and when will she?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that mental health is a real issue in our prisons. I recently had a meeting with the Health Secretary on how we can improve mental health services. We are enabling governors to co-commission those health services. I was recently at HMP Lincoln discussing mental health services with the governor. Such services are available only from Monday to Friday, and he wants them to be available all week round, and we will enable that to happen.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): In part due to increased attacks on prison officers, more than 200,000 days were lost through ill health by prison officers in the past 12 months. Will the Secretary of State update the House on what the figure lost through sick days is as of now, and what steps she will take to reduce that figure?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. There is an issue with sick days. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), who is responsible for prisons and probation holds a daily meeting in which he goes through the levels of sickness at each prison and works with the governors on what we can do. One thing we are doing is strengthening the frontline to ensure that we have more officers available for support.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am glad that the Secretary of State recognises the importance of the number of officers, and I congratulate her on the extra moneys available. Does she agree that in potentially violent situations one of the most important factors is the availability of experienced officers who have the knowledge and the personal relationships with inmates to calm them down? Can she give us more detail about what is being done to deal with the current very high levels of wastage of experienced officers?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and the evidence backs him up that having experienced officers is vital. We have a higher proportion of experienced officers in 2016 than we did in 2010;
more than 80% of our prison officers have five or more years of experience. I am absolutely determined to keep those officers in the service. Two weeks ago, we launched a fast-track programme to help people already in the service to progress in their careers. We are also offering retention payments, particularly in hard-to-recruit areas, because we certainly need to keep those very important staff on board.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): In every one of Her Majesty’s inspector’s reports on closed male facilities published during the Secretary of State’s time in post—reports on Bedford, Chelmsford, Hindley, Onley, Risley, Swaleside and Winchester, and the youth facilities at Isis and Wetherby—outcomes of the test of prison safety deemed them to be either poor or not sufficiently good. When can we expect a positive report on prison safety in closed male prisons?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady is right that current levels of violence in our prisons are not acceptable. That is why we launched the prison safety and reform White Paper, with measures to deal with drugs, drones and phones, as well as to bolster the number of front-line staff. We are also working directly with governors to help them to deal with issues that might trigger incidents in their prisons while we build up that front-line capability. I announced in October that we are recruiting an extra 400 staff in 10 of the most challenging prisons; we have already given job offers to 280 people, so we are making progress.

Yasmin Qureshi: The Ministry states in the White Paper that it will trial the inclusion of prison co-ordinates in no-fly zones to prevent banned items from being dropped into prisons. How will that work in practice and what is being done now to reduce demand for banned items in prisons?

Elizabeth Truss: The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey is working with drone manufacturers and leading a cross-Government taskforce to get in place the technology needed to do that. We are also employing solutions such as installing extra netting. Last week I was at HMP Pentonville, which now has patrol dogs whose barking helps to deter drones. We are using all sorts of solutions to deal with contraband entering our prisons.

Mental Health: Prisons

2. James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What plans the Government have to tackle mental health issues in prisons.

15. Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What plans the Government have to tackle mental health issues in prisons.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): A key aspect of our prison reform programme will be to address offender mental health and improve outcomes for prisoners. We are introducing co-commissioning, which will make sure that governors are focused on and accountable for those outcomes, alongside health commissioners. I know the Secretary of State has discussed the matter with the Health Secretary and it is a high priority for both of them.

James Duddridge: Last year, I spent more than a month in a small room, unable to leave. I lost track of where I was. I became fearful over the slightest of issues. I felt that I could not breathe. I was not incarcerated in prison; I was in hospital following a physical illness, but the experience made me reflect on how easy it is to develop a mental health issue when confined in a small space and lacking orientation. With that in mind, what assessment has the Department made of people developing mental problems in prison, rather than going in with such problems, and what can be done to reduce that?

Rehman Chishti: A recent report by the prisons and probation ombudsman found that 70% of those who committed suicide had a mental health issue. What steps will the Government take specifically to tackle this problem?

Dr Lee: Every death in custody is a tragedy. We are committed to reducing the number of self-inflicted deaths. We have reviewed the case assessment care in custody and teamwork process for prisoners assessed as being at risk and we are piloting revised safer custody training in response. All prison officers, both new and experienced, receive training to help offenders with mental health issues.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Statistics show that 50% of those who are in prison suffer from personality disorders. Does the Minister agree that it is important to assess such issues when people enter the criminal justice system—even at the stage of the custody suite—rather than after their incarceration?

Dr Lee: Of course the initial assessment is important, as is who does that assessment. In addition to our work on that, the care following the assessment and ongoing care, as well as the observation of prisoners, are being closely looked at.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) asked the Secretary of State when she had last visited a prison’s mental health service. Suicide in prisons is at a 25-year high. It is utterly disgusting that neither the Health Secretary nor the Secretary of State for Justice has visited prisons to see what is going on. What is happening?

Dr Lee: As I have said, each of those suicides is a tragedy. The Government are fully aware of that, and I am aware that the Secretary of State for Health will be visiting a prison. I was at Peterborough prison last week discussing mental health provision there, and I visited the mother and baby unit at the same time. I am under
Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman asks a very important question. At the moment, roughly 50% of prisoners are illiterate as far as English and maths are concerned. Our prison safety and reform White Paper proposes that we test prisoners’ literacy on entry and on exit so that we can measure the distance travelled and progress made in prison.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Which prison has the best record for training prisoners for gainful employment once they leave, and how might that best practice be rolled out across the prison estate?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend asks a very important question. Across the Prison Service there are patches of good work aimed at employment post-release. We want to create a system to measure that, and to identify and rank prisons according to how well they do in that respect. That is precisely what our White Paper does. Employment post-release is one of the outcome measures against which governors will be judged once we proceed with reform.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Work experience outside prison can also enhance a prisoner’s employment opportunities on release, so what guidance is the Minister giving prisons—not just reform prisons, but governors of all prisons—in relation to release on temporary licence?

Mr Gyimah: Release on temporary licence has a huge role to play in helping prisoners to gain employment in the wider world. I have been speaking with Timpson’s, for example, which employs a lot of ex-offenders, and that is how they are trialled before release. We are looking at that to ensure that the guidance that governors receive allows them to do more with release on temporary licence, specifically in relation to employment opportunities.

Prison Reform

5. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What plans the Government have to increase the autonomy of prison governors to enable them to make reforms.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Elizabeth Truss): We will turn around offenders’ lives only if governors have the levers they need over education, work and health in prison. That is why our reforms devolve power over budgets and services to governors.

Victoria Prentis: Procurement is a complicated business. What guidance and training are governors being given to ensure that they can complete the procurement process properly, be it for the provision of mental health services or even the recruitment of the dogs that bark at drones?

Elizabeth Truss: It sounds like my hon. Friend is asking for some of those patrol dogs at her local prison, HMP Bullingdon, which I am delighted to say will be one of the 30 prisons that will be recruiting locally to build up a local cadre of staff, starting next January. The answer is that we will be setting up a What Works network to help governors gain the expertise they need to take those decisions and make those things happen locally.

no illusions about the challenges involved in addressing the problem. We are fully aware of the problem and I intend to make further statements on the subject because the mental health of prisoners is such a key problem.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): However important it is to improve and enhance mental health care in our prisons, little will be achieved without continuity of care once prisoners leave prison. What is the Department doing, with the health service, to ensure that continuity of care is provided for prisoners from day one when they leave prison?

Dr Lee: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question which, as ever, is a wise one. Yes, continuity of care before, during and after prison is key, not just for the mental health of prisoners, but for their physical health too. We have ongoing discussions with the Department of Health on the matter, and my intention is to make the continuity of records and the continuity of care as a consequence much better in the future.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Does the Minister accept that many prisoners with mental health issues would be better served and facilitated outside the prison regime? If so, what alternatives are being looked at?

Dr Lee: Of course, the hon. Gentleman is right. However, prison can be an opportunity to address mental health problems that have not previously been diagnosed and properly treated, so being in prison may be an opportunity for someone to receive proper care, which is ultimately what I am about.

Apprenticeships: Prisoners

4. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to introduce apprenticeships for prisoners.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): As outlined in the prison safety and reform White Paper, we will introduce a prisoner apprenticeship pathway that will offer prisoners opportunities that count towards the completion of a formal apprenticeship on release. This scheme is being developed as part of our offender employment strategy which will be published in the new year.

Maria Caulfield: Can the Minister update me on progress in introducing apprenticeships in HMP Lewes?

Mr Gyimah: HMP Lewes is exactly the kind of local prison that will benefit from the new prison apprenticeship pathway. I anticipate that the prison will also benefit from the new Prison Service apprenticeship scheme that we are launching in 2017, which will help recruit members to the Prison Service by widening the number of entry points into the service.

16. [907659] Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Most apprenticeships require literacy. What proportion of prisoners was functionally illiterate at the start of their sentence and what proportion was functionally illiterate on release?
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Government Front Benchers seem to be doing a bit of sleepwalking this morning. I know that it is nearly Christmas, but can I ask them to wake up to the dangers of empowering governors too much? When the former Select Committee that I chaired looked at prison education all those years ago, we found that one real danger was that a very good system of education and training in a prison could suddenly be wiped out by a new governor who wanted nothing to do with it. We need common standards across all prisons. Is that not right?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We are being very specific about what we are asking governors to achieve in raising education standards, getting prisoners into apprenticeships and work, and improving health standards. We are specifying the what, but giving governors much more freedom over the how, because they are the people with the expertise. The officers on the landing are the ones who talk to the prisoners, and they need that freedom to be able to turn people’s lives around.

Dangerous Driving

6. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What progress the Government have made on the sentencing review of motoring offences and penalties relating to dangerous drivers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Government yesterday issued a consultation paper following a review of driving offences and penalties. The consultation focuses on the driving offences that result in death or serious injury and proposes that the courts should be able to impose a life sentence, or longer determinate sentences, in the most serious cases.

Craig Tracey: I welcome the consultation. Does the Minister agree that it presents the perfect opportunity to close a loophole whereby in the event of a pedestrian being hit by a driver under the influence of alcohol or drugs, as happened to my constituent Sean Morley, who was tragically killed as a result, the maximum sentence available for failing to stop and report is just six months, leaving no incentive for the driver to stay around? In Sean’s case, the Crown Prosecution Service and the judge had only the charge of failing to available to them, not death by dangerous driving.

Mr Gyimah: The case to which my hon. Friend refers is truly horrific, and I extend my personal sympathies to Sean Morley’s family. Nothing can compensate for the loss of a loved one by a killer driver who drives irresponsibly. I encourage the family to contribute to the consultation so that we can take their points on board.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Campaigners and families are delighted that the Government have now announced this review, and I pay tribute to all of them, and to all hon. Members on both sides of the House who contributed to the cross-party manifesto in 2014. The direction of travel is clearly welcome, but I just ask that consideration is given to getting rid of the charge of careless driving, because at the moment some of the most dangerous sorts of reckless, criminal driving are called careless, and that is wrong.

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I congratulate him on his long-standing campaign on the issue. We looked very carefully at the distinction between careless and dangerous driving, which he wants us to get rid of, but we came to the view that a sense of culpability needs to be reflected in the decisions that the courts come to. For example, someone could be momentarily distracted by their children crying in the backseat and—God forbid—something bad then happens. That is very different from someone involved in speed racing. That is why we have chosen to keep that distinction.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): My constituents George and Giulietta Galli-Atkinson set up the Livia awards in memory of their daughter. She was killed by a driver who mounted the pavement, but who was found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving and received only a fine. My constituents have campaigned for over 20 years for tougher sentences. How might that be achieved as a consequence of the Minister’s consultation?

Mr Gyimah: We are proposing a new life sentence as a maximum penalty for those convicted of dangerous driving. As a consequence, we are giving the courts the tools they need to make the punishment fit the crime, and that is testimony to the campaign my hon. Friend and his constituents have been running for years.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I welcome the consultation on this matter, but I seek some clarity from the Minister on the distinction between careless and dangerous driving. The consultation makes it clear that the Government do not propose any changes but seek instead to explain and address misconceptions about the law. How exactly does the Department intend to ensure greater consistency across the UK in applying this law?

Mr Gyimah: The consultation does have question 7—an open question—so if the hon. Lady has any specific concerns that are not reflected in the consultation, she can by all means submit them in that question.

Prisoners: Rehabilitation and Work

7. David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What further plans the Government have to provide prisoners with (a) drug rehabilitation and (b) education and skills training to improve their prospects for finding work on release from prison.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): As part of our reforms, we are going to set clear standards on the outcomes we expect each prison governor to achieve on drug rehabilitation, education and other drivers of rehabilitation.

David Warburton: I thank the Minister for that. Given that 42% of adult prisoners in England and Wales were permanently excluded from school, does he agree that it
is only through education that the cycle of reoffending can be stopped? What more can be done to ensure that this message properly resonates across the prison estate?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend makes an important point: education is one of the key ways in which we can help to break the cycle of reoffending—when the offender, obviously, is willing. One of the things we have done to speed up this process is to transfer the education budget from the Department for Education to the Ministry of Justice. That budget will be delegated to governors so that they can organise education that suits individual prisoners’ needs.

Stephen Metcalfe: I am pleased to hear about the steps that have been taken to improve drug rehabilitation and education. Could I suggest that prisoners close to release are also given careers advice and experience mock interviews to aid their search for work on release?

Mr Gyimah: Again, that is an important point. If someone has spent quite a lot of time inside, it is highly likely that they will be unused to the world of work and certainly to interviews. One of the things we are doing is having Department for Work and Pensions work coaches work with prison governors as part of the regime. Their job is to help to prepare prisoners, alongside rehabilitation companies, for life after release.

17. [907690] Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): A constituent of mine has a criminal record but has been a law-abiding citizen for over 40 years. Should there not come a time when she is able to move on and no longer has to explain to prospective employers the mistake she made when she was much younger?

Mr Gyimah: My right hon. Friend raises a point around conviction and time spent. Obviously, there is the Ban the Box campaign, which we are supporters of, that encourages employers to look beyond these things, certainly when it comes to employing ex-offenders. I would be happy to speak with my right hon. Friend directly about the case of her constituent.

22. [907696] Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): In Havant, the Hampshire community rehabilitation company helps offenders and drug users to find employment and training opportunities. Will the Minister continue to support its excellent work in breaking the reoffending cycle?

Mr Gyimah: Yes.

Prison Safety

8. Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reduce the number of assaults, incidents of self-harm and deaths in prison. [907681]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): We take the safety of prisoners in our jails extremely seriously. It is of paramount importance that they are kept safe and given the opportunity to reform.

Rosie Cooper: At the Justice Committee last week, the prisons Minister said in reply to a question regarding the recent escape from Her Majesty’s Prison Pentonville, that the frequency of cell searches can be stopped? What more can be done to ensure that the coalition decision to end daily cell searches was right, or does he think they might have prevented this escape and limited the use of mobile phones, drugs and weapons?

Mr Gyimah: Cell searches are carried out on an intelligence-led basis at establishment level. In addition, we are investing £3 million on a regional and national intelligence network so that we can identify where phones, for example, are being smuggled in to aid criminal activities in our prisons and deal with such situations appropriately.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Our prison chaplains deal with all these issues daily and are almost universally well thought of, so will the Minister tell the House what steps he is taking, first, to recruit the full number of chaplains, and secondly, to make sure that they have the time to do the important work they are there to do?

Mr Gyimah: That is an excellent suggestion, which I am willing to look at in detail.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Is the Secretary of State for Justice aware of the situation at HMP Maghaberry, where three prisoners have tragically taken their own lives, and will she and her team use all their influence on the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland Justice Minister to make sure that this is dealt with immediately?

Mr Gyimah: As my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice said, every death in prison is a tragic one. Such people are in the care of the state, and we have to make sure that we take good care of them in that respect. I am still waiting for Gentleman has outlined.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): As I have mentioned on a number of occasions, there is no real incentive for prisoners to behave themselves in prison because of the law introduced by the previous Labour Government that prisoners have to be released halfway through their sentence irrespective of how badly they behave or whether they are still a danger to the public. I am still waiting for the Government to give an explanation of why they think this law should still be on the statute book, and I have yet to receive a satisfactory response. Will the Minister now give us the reason why, by law, prisoners should be released halfway through their sentence irrespective of how badly they behave or whether they are still a danger to the public?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend raised this issue at the Select Committee last week, and I will give him the same answer I gave then. When prisoners are released, even at the halfway point, they remain on licence, and if there is a breach of the licence, they are recalled to prison. That remains the case.
Prison Officers

9. Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve levels of recruitment and retention among prison officers.

Elizabeth Truss: In our “Prison Safety and Reform” White Paper, we make it very clear that it is important to have a skilled force of officers. That is why we are investing £100 million, which will enable us to make sure that one officer is responsible for six prisoners. Through our work, we have shown that that is effective in keeping a prison safe, and in being able to turn around the lives of offenders.

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): I have three prisons in my constituency. Combined, they have one of the largest concentrations of prisoners in the country. The prison officers in Sheppey’s prisons are fantastic people—dedicated, hard working and highly responsible—but Sheppey’s prisons are seriously understaffed. Because of our location in the south-east of England, it is difficult to recruit officers, given the number of other jobs available to them. What reassurance can my right hon. Friend give my prison officers that steps will be taken to solve the problem of recruitment on Sheppey?

Elizabeth Truss: I agree with my hon. Friend that prison officers do a fantastic job. When I visit prisons up and down the country, I meet officers and see the great work they do, their dedication to the job and why they have gone into it. There are staff recruitment issues in about a quarter of our prisons because there is high demand for employees, particularly in the south-east of England. That is why we are offering governors to offer market supplements of up to £4,000 to recruit officers, and retention payments of up to £3,000 to keep those officers on board.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): It is not just the cut of 7,000 prison officers, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) talked about; another 7,000 non-officer grades are also being cut. That is a total cut of 14,000 staff—2,000 is a drop in the ocean. That is why people are getting hurt and killed in Britain’s prisons. When will the Secretary of State return staffing to pre-2010 levels, which is needed to ensure safety in prisons?

Elizabeth Truss: The important point is that the staffing that we are putting into our prisons is evidence-based and enables us to operate with a ratio of one officer for every six prisoners. That is what works.

Human Rights Act


The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): As is well known, we shall set out our proposals for a Bill of Rights in due course, and we shall of course consult fully on those proposals.

John Nicolson: In the light of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities finding that cuts to benefits meet the threshold for human rights violations, instead of replacing the Human Rights Act, should not the Secretary of State focus on ensuring the protection of rights to which the Government are already committed?
**Sir Oliver Heald:** The UK Government and this country do not need lectures about our human rights record. Our country has a proud tradition that goes back 800 years of pioneering human rights and spreading our values around the world. We do not need any lessons.

**Mr Julian Brazier** (Canterbury) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that not only is it a good idea to make the change, but that we were members of the European convention on human rights for a whole generation before we put human rights legislation into British law, and that the clear understanding needs to be that British courts, informed by legislation from this Parliament, make the decisions?

**Sir Oliver Heald:** Of course it was Winston Churchill in his famous speech in Place Kléber in Strasbourg who pointed out the importance of fundamental human rights after the second world war, and British lawyers played a very important part in framing the European convention on human rights. Having said that, it is right to consider what that should be in the modern context, and whether we need a British jurisprudence over those rights. That is what we are doing.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Five times in the past few years the UK Government have been found guilty of a breach of article 3 of the European convention on human rights for their treatment of people with mental health problems in immigration detention. Many more cases have been settled or are pending. Will the Minister confirm that the solution to that shameful state of affairs is not to water down that pending. Will the Minister confirm that the solution to that sort does not mean that it does not have the same root. We in this country should be proud of that. [907692]

**Elizabeth Truss:** After the press attacks on the judiciary, it took the Justice Secretary nearly 48 hours to release a statement. The former Lord Chief Justice Lord Judge said of that statement that he thought it was “a little too late—and quite a lot too little”. Does she agree with Lord Judge, and if so will she take the opportunity to apologise?

**Elizabeth Truss:** It is not the job of the Government or the Lord Chancellor to police headlines. The process is working absolutely as it should. People have a right to bring a case to court. The Government have the right to defend our position in the court. The judiciary is independent and impartial, and the press can scrutinise the process within the law.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): I agree with my right hon. Friend. As we sit here today in this Parliament, just across Parliament Square the Supreme Court is sitting with 11 Supreme Court justices. Does she not agree—and does this whole House not agree—that the integrity of the Supreme Court and the justices should not be impugned?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. As I said last month, the Supreme Court justices are people of great integrity and impartiality.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): In response to the constitutional change brought about by devolution, the renowned international jurist, the late Professor Sir Neil MacCormick, stressed the importance of the principles that justified judicial independence and the concept of the separation of powers. As the United Kingdom once more faces major constitutional change after the EU referendum, will the Justice Secretary join me in reaffirming the importance of those principles?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I absolutely will. The independence of the judiciary is a vital part of our free society, as is our free press. Both those things are important. We have seen over the last months that we have a robust independent judiciary and a robust free press, which I look forward to discussing with the hon. and learned Lady very soon.

**Joanna Cherry:** In recent years, it has become commonplace for some Conservative Members to deprecate the judges of the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights simply for doing their job. Does the Lord Chancellor agree that such scant respect for the rule of law has encouraged a climate in which a major tabloid, which I believe some people call a newspaper, thinks it is appropriate to describe justices of our own Supreme Court as “enemies of the people”?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I have been very clear that the independence of the judiciary is a vital part of our rule of law. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister for Courts and Justice has just said, it is important for the UK that British courts make those decisions, and that is precisely what we are going to achieve.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): Yesterday, the President of the Supreme Court, Lord Neuberger, said at the beginning of the article 50 appeal:
“This appeal is concerned with legal issues, and, as judges, our duty is to consider those issues impartially, and to decide the case, according to law. That is what we shall do.”

Does the Lord Chancellor agree that if she had done her duty and spoken out at the time to defend the judiciary, those words would not have been necessary?

Elizabeth Truss: As I said earlier, I frequently make it clear that the independence of the judiciary is a vital part of our constitution and our freedoms. I also think that it is absolutely right that the President of the Supreme Court, who has absolute integrity and impartiality, should make that case as well.

**Vulnerable Witnesses**

13. Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to protect vulnerable witnesses when they testify in court. [907686]

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): We are committed to helping vulnerable witnesses to give their very best evidence. A range of measures exist to help to reduce the anxiety of giving evidence, including video-link evidence away from the courtroom, and, within the court, giving evidence behind a screen.

Andrew Bingham: Following the closure of my local court in Buxton, witnesses will have to travel from my High Peak constituency to the nearest court. Can my right hon. and learned Friend provide further assurance that there will be protection for witnesses not only in the court, but when they are travelling to it?

Sir Oliver Heald: Yes, I can do that. When a witness needs protection, the police assess what is required to keep them safe. Witness care officers also help to ensure that the witness has any help that they need to attend court.

**Prisoners: Rehabilitation and Work**

14. John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve rehabilitation in prisons. [907687]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Elizabeth Truss): The prison and courts reform Bill will, for the first time, set out in legislation that the reform of offenders is a key purpose of prison. Prison is not just about housing offenders until release. Everyone involved in prisons, from officers to headquarters, will be focused on turning prisoners’ lives around.

John Glen: Will the Lord Chancellor think about the pathway back to independent crime-free living and the use of organisations such as the Amber Foundation, which do a lot to look after people before they have developed the life skills to live independently and free from crime?

Elizabeth Truss: I congratulate the Amber Foundation on its work, particularly in turning around the lives of young people. We will shortly issue our response to Charlie Taylor’s review on how we will improve the youth justice system to do just that.

23. Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Given the recent attack on a prison officer in my constituency, what will the Secretary of State be doing to ensure the safety of prison officers at work?

Elizabeth Truss: Making our prisons safer places is my No. 1 priority. That is why we are dealing with drugs, drones and phones, and it is why we are investing in additional prison staff across the estate.

**Missing Persons**

18. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help relatives of missing persons manage financial and other affairs on their behalf. [907691]

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): We are preparing legislation to create the new legal status of “guardian of the property and affairs of a missing person”. We will introduce it as parliamentary time allows.

Kevin Hollinrake: I hope to introduce a ten-minute rule Bill on guardianship that would help relatives and friends to manage the affairs of missing people. In memory of Claudia Lawrence, my constituents’ daughter who went missing seven long years ago, will the Government offer that Bill their full support? Will they also be willing to honour her memory by referring to it, whenever possible, as Claudia’s Bill?

Sir Oliver Heald: That is good news, and I wish my hon. Friend well with his Bill. I understand why he wants to refer to it as Claudia’s law. I would like to extend my sympathies, as I am sure the whole House would, to Peter and Joan Lawrence. The Government will formally announce their position on Second Reading, but we are keen for this matter to be tackled.

**Topical Questions**

T1. David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Elizabeth Truss): Our probation officers do a vital job—it is one that I value highly—in turning offenders’ lives around, and the prisons and probation Minister is conducting a comprehensive review of the probation system that is focused on improving the quality of our probation services. As with our plans for prisons, we want a simpler, clearer system, with specific outcome measures such as getting offenders off drugs, improving educational standards, and getting offenders into apprenticeships and work. We also want closer working with the Prison Service. We will set out our more detailed plans after our review is completed in April.

David Rutley: Guide dog owners are too often turned away by taxis, despite that being illegal, and research has shown that when offenders are prosecuted, they can be fined less than £200. Will my right hon. Friend review the situation and find ways to increase the penalties to ensure that such discrimination is better addressed?
Elizabeth Truss: It is appalling that some taxi drivers refuse to take assistance dogs. That is an offence under the Equality Act 2010, and it can result in a fine of £1,000. I know that the Department for Transport is looking at improving training for drivers, and at the role that taxi licensing can play in eradicating this discrimination.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Given the Government’s climbdown on their outrageous plan for immigration and asylum tribunal fees, and if they really believe in access to justice, is it not about time they listened to opposition to their unaffordable employment tribunal fees and their small claims limit changes, which hit injured people on lower incomes, and to the urgent demands that they finally begin a review into their savage legal aid cuts?

Elizabeth Truss: We have already announced a review of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012—we will shortly be announcing the timetable—but we need a system that is both open and affordable, which is exactly what the Government are delivering.

T2. [907666] Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that an independent judiciary and a free press are two pillars of a free society, and that, while we might not always like how each acts, we should be proud of, and protect, those freedoms.

Elizabeth Truss: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We can be incredibly proud of our independent judiciary, which is the cornerstone of the rule of law and supports our commerce and trade, and we also have a robust free press, which is vital to ensuring a free society.

T3. [907667] Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): As has been stated, last June the Government commenced their review of the future of employment tribunal fees. As of yet, we have not seen any results. Will the Minister give me a firm date for the review’s completion and publication? Is it not time the Government abandoned these unfair fees, which cut across the rights of working people?

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): There is a difference: Government Members think it only fair that those who can afford to should make a contribution to a service that costs hard-working taxpayers £66 million a year. We are reviewing the situation—we are doing a careful job, because this is an important issue—and we will publish the outcome in due course.

T4. [907668] David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agrees that one of the main challenges facing the justice system is integrating ex-offenders back into the outside world upon their release. Does she agree that this requires the co-operation of employers as well as former prisoners? What is the Department doing to ensure that such co-operation is both encouraged and increased?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my hon. Friend about this vital means of reducing reoffending. We will be launching a new employment strategy next year in partnership with employers, and prisoners can take up apprenticeships in and out of prison so that we create the link between prison and the outside world. Most importantly, we are matching jobs that are available on the outside with the training and work that prisoners do on the inside so that there is a pathway to employment.

T8. [907672] Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): The European criminal records information system enables the UK to access information about the convictions of EU nationals, but the future of our involvement is now unclear. What plans does the Department have to ensure that there is effective engagement post-Brexit?

Sir Oliver Heald: It is important that the Scottish Parliament and Government liaise with the UK Parliament and Government about Brexit, and that is happening, as the hon. Gentleman knows. ECRIS is an important system, but the Government are not announcing their Brexit negotiating position at this stage.

Sir Oliver Heald: My hon. Friend’s question is about a very important point. In the same period, the time taken to complete a case has halved, and the Family Justice Board, which I co-chair, is investigating the reasons for the increase in cases and whether it is temporary. I agree that there are some vital issues here, such as helping women not to lose successive children to care. My hon. Friend might have heard about the Pause project, which is doing promising work in this area, and I would be happy to have a meeting with her to discuss the issue further.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Three Secretaries of State—for Justice, for Health, and for Communities and Local Government—believe that parents in Hull should have an independent inquiry to find out what happened to their babies’ ashes. Does the Secretary of State fully understand the disappointment of those parents that she will not stand up for justice for them by establishing an independent inquiry to find out what happened to those ashes?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): I am sympathetic to the hon. Lady’s concerns and I offer my sympathy again to her constituents. We are supportive of local historical investigations, but we do not plan to order a historical inquiry in Hull or elsewhere. Hull has made significant improvements, including by putting in place measures to improve practices across, and communication between, the cremation authority, local funeral directors and NHS trusts.

T6. [907670] Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What action are the Government taking to address the specific needs of women in the justice system?

Dr Lee: We are working to ensure that we take proper account of the specific needs of women at every stage of the criminal justice system so that they receive the support that they need to make positive changes in their
lives. We want to see fewer women offending and reoffending, and we will set out our strategy for how we manage female offenders in 2017.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): May I give the Secretary of State another opportunity to answer my question? She told the House that she has had meetings to discuss the record levels of suicide in our prisons. Has she actually visited a prison mental health service—and if not, why not?

Elizabeth Truss: I have visited a number of prisons where I have discussed mental health services. I have already answered the hon. Lady’s question.

T9. Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): What specific actions are my right hon. Friend and the Government taking to ensure that the UK remains a specialist leader in world legal services?

Sir Oliver Heald: We are a modern global centre for legal services and dispute resolution, and English law is the international law of choice. Our legal services sector contributes £26 billion to the UK economy. We have the best legal system in the world, and our modernisation programme will maintain that situation. I will be championing, as will the Secretary of State and the whole team, our legal services sector as a key part of post-Brexit global Britain.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): The family of Richard Davies of Yeadon are dismayed that the man found guilty of his manslaughter is being considered for a move to an open prison a year before the family was told that that would be considered and after spending only a year in prison. Is that justice?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): There is obviously a careful risk assessment before people are moved into open prison. I am not aware of the specific facts of the case that the hon. Gentleman has outlined, but I will be happy to meet him to discuss it.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) said that he thought that Lord Neuberger had mentioned that he would decide the case in accordance with the law on the basis of something that the Secretary of State had or had not said. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that Lord Neuberger said that he was deciding the matter on the basis of the law because that is his duty, and because it was stated that the matter would be decided on law, not politics, in paragraph 8 of the High Court judgment?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right about Lord Neuberger’s role—[Interruption.] It is pronounced “Newbergh”; I have had frequent conversations with him. It is important that the judiciary itself states the case, too.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Prisoners serving IPP—imprisonment for public protection—sentences have remained in custody long beyond their tariff and long after the coalition Government abolished such sentences. I understand that a dedicated Ministry of Justice unit is looking into the position of IPP prisoners. Will the Secretary of State tell us exactly what it is doing?

Elizabeth Truss: I have met a number of IPP prisoners who are anxious to hear more about the progress that they will make through the system. The unit is ensuring that there are sufficient parole hearings and that sufficient courses are being taken, and getting people to a stage at which they are ready for release. However, it is always important for us to focus on public protection, and we make sure that we only release people who do not pose a huge risk.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Woodhill prison in my constituency has had more suicides than any other prison this year. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that she is working urgently with the governor to address the situation?

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are working urgently with the governor to address the situation, as well as addressing the overall issue of the number of suicides in our prisons, which is far too high.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Reoffending rates among young offenders remain stubbornly high. Earlier this year, the Association of Youth Offending Team Managers said that there had been a record cut in funding for youth offending teams. What is the Secretary of State doing to address that?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady will not have to wait long before we release the Charlie Taylor report and the Government’s response, which will explain how we will improve outcomes in youth justice.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): In February this year, 21-year-old Croydon resident George Beresford was knocked over and killed by a drink-driver. Because the police and the Crown Prosecution Service were unable to prove that the drink-driver was also driving carelessly, he received only a relatively short driving ban, rather than a custodial sentence. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), for agreeing to meet the family this afternoon, but does he agree that the case should be considered as part of the consultation on driving offences, and that when a drink-driver kills someone, a custodial sentence is appropriate irrespective of whether careless driving can be proven?

Mr Gyimah: Our consultation proposals make it very clear that when a driver has consumed drugs or alcohol and then kills someone, and if there is sufficient evidence to charge that driver with careless or dangerous driving, he or she could face a life sentence. Obviously it is for the Crown Prosecution Service to prosecute on the basis of the evidence, and it is for the courts to hand down the relevant sentence. I look forward to discussing the details of that specific case with the Beresfords later this afternoon.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): A constituent of mine who has pleural plaques is raising an action against his former employers, of whom there are many because of the nature of his work. His claim is
subject to a time bar and must be submitted by the end of the year. However, he cannot obtain a list of his employers because Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs says that that will take 321 days. I am sure that he would appreciate it if the Secretary of State asked the Treasury to make an exception.

Elizabeth Truss: I shall be happy to look into the case with the hon. Lady.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): On her first day in office, the Prime Minister said:
“If you are black you are treated more harshly by the criminal justice system than if you are white.”
I am pleased to be working with the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on a review of the treatment of, and outcomes for, black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals in the criminal justice system. What steps will the Secretary of State take to act on the emerging findings, which show that, in respect of arrests and charging, such people are disproportionately affected?

Elizabeth Truss: I am delighted that my hon. Friend has joined that review, to which I am sure that she will make a major contribution. Clearly there are issues throughout the criminal justice system that we need to examine, but I am certainly keen to see more diversity throughout our legal services industry and our judiciary, and we are working very hard on that.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Education budgets are being devoted to prison governors. Will each of those budgets be ring-fenced for education spending purposes?

Elizabeth Truss: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Well! A one-word answer. Absolutely magnificent. I very much doubt that we shall hear a one-word question, but we can always ask the Chair of the Justice Committee, who is himself an accomplished lawyer. There is a hint there. I call Mr Robert Neill.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Given the Government’s welcome development of a corruption prevention strategy for our prisons, will the Minister look personally at the allegations of systemic corruption raised by BuzzFeed News today on the basis that this presents a serious risk of undermining our prison system?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. While the vast majority of prison officers are hard-working and dedicated, there is a small minority that is an issue. We acknowledge that in the White Paper, and we are reporting early next year on our corruption strategy. We are also considering options for a prison-specific offence of corruption to crack down on that scourge.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I have previously raised my concerns with the Lord Chancellor about the rise of gangs promoting extremist ideology within prisons. Will she update the House on how her Department is cracking down on extremist behaviour?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right about our concerns. We launched our response to the Acheson review in the summer. I am pleased to say that all prison officers are currently being trained—and will be by the end of the year—in tackling extremism, but I would be very pleased to have a meeting with her to discuss what further measures we can take to deal with this issue.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Given the Government’s welcome development of a corruption prevention strategy for our prisons, will the Minister look personally at the allegations of systemic corruption raised by BuzzFeed News today on the basis that this presents a serious risk of undermining our prison system?

Philip Davies: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

When the previous Labour Government changed the law so that prisoners had to be released halfway through their sentence irrespective of how badly they behaved or if they were still a risk to the public, the then Conservative Opposition were apoplectic and voted against the change. Do the Government think that the then Conservative party was wrong to oppose that change in the law?

Mr Gyimah: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier today and last week to the Select Committee.

Mr Speaker: I think this show will run—probably for some years to come.
These reforms will set the railway on a firmer footing for the future. We can, and will, make sure our rail network plays its part in making this country a country that works for everyone. I will bring forward in due course a new strategy for our railways with more detail on what I am setting out today.

Andy McDonald: Private companies will only engage with the Secretary of State's plans if they believe that they will be able to extract yet further value from Britain's railways at the expense of taxpayers and commuters. Not only does this mean poor value for the public, but it also risks compromising safety. The last time the Tories privatised the rail tracks it resulted in a series of fatal accidents, which led to the creation of Network Rail in the first place. Now the Secretary of State wants to start us on a slippery slope back to the bad old days of Railtrack, with profit-chasing companies being entrusted with the safety-critical role of being responsible for our rail infrastructure. Has he not learned the lessons of Railtrack, or is he simply choosing to ignore them? Why does he expect things to be different this time?

Will the Secretary of State explain how his planned "integrated operating teams" will be different from the "deep alliances" between Network Rail and South West Trains, which were abandoned, and from the similar arrangement between Network Rail and ScotRail, which is performing abysmally? Will the same system of regulation apply in his new landscape? What discussions has he had with the Office of Rail Regulation about this? What costings have been done for this programme? Has a cost-benefit analysis been carried out? It is time for our railways to be run under public ownership, in the public interest, as an integrated national asset in public hands, with affordable fares for all and with long-term investment in the railway network. Sadly, today's announcement will take us further away from that than ever before, but an incoming Labour Government will redress that as a matter of urgency.

Chris Grayling: Fortunately, there is not an imminent Labour Government. The trouble is that Labour Members want to turn the clock back to the days of British Rail and of the unions having beer and sandwiches at No. 10. We want to modernise the railways and make them work better. This is not about privatisation. I am not privatising Network Rail. I am creating teams on the ground with the same incentives to work together in the interests of the passenger. An essential part of that—the bit the hon. Gentleman has not spotted—is that the Shaw recommendations on route devolution, which will give real power to local teams to make decisions about their routes without always referring to the centre, will make it possible for those alliances to work much better than they have in the past. We know that where there have been alliances, they have made something of a difference, but they could do so much more.

This is not rocket science. If the trains are being run from over here and the tracks from over there, when things go wrong we get two separate teams waving contracts at each other rather than working together. Of course our railways do not maximise their potential. This is about forging teamwork on the ground to respond to challenges, to plan better and to deliver a better service to passengers. That is what we should all be
aspiring to. Moving the deckchairs around, renationalising
the railways and taking away hundreds of millions of
pounds a year of investment in new trains from the
private sector would take our railways backwards and
make the travelling public worse off. This is a sign that,
as always, the Labour party has not made it into the
modern world.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I warmly
welcome efforts to create greater integration between
those who run the tracks and those who run the trains,
but will my right hon. Friend acknowledge that a one-
size-fits-all model would not be the right one, because
certain lines are so heavily used by diverse operators
that such a degree of integration would be difficult to
achieve?

Chris Grayling: That is absolutely right. It is very
straightforward in areas where there is complete
synchronisation between the Network Rail routes and
the train operators, such as on the west coast main line,
which has multiple operators. We also have to be careful
to protect the interests of freight operators and open
access operators. I am not planning to change the
fundamental regulatory structure, but by forging teams
together by letting franchises and structuring Network
Rail in a way that allows them to integrate, we will be
able to deliver better day-to-day performance and a
more reliable railway over the vast majority of our
network.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and
Strathspey) (SNP): The Secretary of State is right to
acknowledge the problems with our rail network, but he
should not remedy them through further privatisation.
There is higher passenger satisfaction and reliability in
Scotland than on any other network in the UK, but
Scotland could do better. Will he agree to devolve
power over Network Rail to the Scottish Parliament?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman has just described
progress in Scotland, but the point that he has missed is
that Scotland is the one place where we have a working
alliance of the kind I am talking about. What he is
describing is a step on the road to the model that I want
to create across the railway, which he says builds passenger
satisfaction. That is why this is the right thing to do. It is
not about privatisation; it is about teamwork to deliver
a better service for the passenger.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Although
Network Rail does many things well, it is often cumbersome
and unresponsive to the customer. Will my right hon.
Friend confirm that the purpose of his virtual operating
companies is to bring scale benefits in cost and service
to the customer?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend, who has great experience
in such matters, is absolutely right. Right now, the
incentives for team members in Network Rail are different
from those in train operators. The incentive across the
entire railway network should be to do a better job for
the customer. Part of that process will involve aligning
incentives so that everyone has the right motivation to
deliver for the people who matter: the customers.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op):
A joined-up approach could bring benefits and has
been called for on many occasions by, among others,
the Transport Committee. How will safety be protected
in the specific model that the Transport Secretary now
advocates? Could it be the beginning of a highly expensive
fragmentation of the system?

Chris Grayling: The opposite is the case. This is not
about fragmentation; it is about joining up. As the hon.
Lady will know, we have various teams on the ground
across our railways, some looking after the track and
some looking after the trains. Sometimes they work
together well, but sometimes they do not. By creating a
structure that shapes teams on the ground, which involves
decentralisation within Network Rail of the kind
recommended by Nicola Shaw and the sort of partnerships
that Sir Roy McNulty recommended, we will reach a
place, about which the hon. Lady has talked in the past,
where we have a more joined-up railway that does a
better job for the customer.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I congratulate
my right hon. Friend on taking an initiative that could
and should have been taken about 20 years ago. I am
delighted that my constituents travelling from east Kent
will be among the first to benefit from better co-operation
between Network Rail and the train operating company.
Will he indicate whether funding will be available for the
Kent coast line to be brought at least into the 20th century
and preferably into the 21st century?

Chris Grayling: Following the new Southeastern franchise
bids, I hope and expect to see the kind of benefit that we
have seen on the East Anglian rail network, where every
single train is due to be replaced as part of the new
franchise. That is the sort of progress that makes a real
difference to passengers, and I want to see that kind of
improvement across the network, including on
Southeastern. As the two sides of the railway work
closer together, the ability to deliver small, incremental
improvements quickly becomes better and more readily
available, and we can then improve services.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): This is a Minister
who has a bit of form. In a previous job, he wrecked the
prison system. He now has the job at Transport and is
about to cause havoc there as well.

Chris Grayling: Let me surprise the hon. Gentleman
by saying that I am the Minister who decided not to
privatise the Prison Service, a decision which was described
in my office by the Prison Officers Association as a
victory. I hate to disabuse him, but I am not an inveterate
privatiser; I am an inveterate improver of services.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I thank my
right hon. Friend for his encouraging response to the
urgent question. A number of operators work with
Network Rail in both our constituencies and not only
has the number of complaints dropped dramatically
but, more importantly, there has been a positive response
to requests for service changes from the constituents.

Chris Grayling: That is right. Two rail routes run
through my constituency. One is run by South West
Trains and one by Southern. We understand the issues
on the Southern network, but I recently went to a public
meeting on the edge of my constituency about the
service provided by South West Trains and found an
[Chris Grayling]

Audience broadly full of praise for the operator. There have been a bumpy few weeks this autumn and some things have gone wrong with the infrastructure on the network, but there are many decent people on our railways who have been there for a long time, working hard for passengers, and we must always recognise that.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Some of the main causes of delays and problems on the network include failures of signals, points and trains. Will the Secretary of State explain in specifics what will be different under his proposals from what currently happens?

Chris Grayling: Let me give the hon. Gentleman a specific example. About 10 days ago, there was a quite bad signal failure at lunchtime on the South West Trains network. I caught the train home during the evening peak, by which time the service was pretty much back to normal. It is a joined-up route that has the nearest thing to an alliance on the network, and the two sides work hard together to deliver improvements quickly when something goes wrong. That is an example of the benefits of joined-up working, as opposed to having to wait several hours for the two teams to decide how to do things together.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I welcome the move towards greater integration with operating teams. Does the Secretary of State share my hope that that might stop the buck-passing between train operating companies and Network Rail, which many of my constituents north of the river on the Thameslink line have suffered daily and to which I drew his attention yesterday?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. I make no pretence: there are some genuine problems on our railways at the moment. Those are mostly problems of intensive use and dramatic increases in passenger numbers, beyond anything envisaged even 10 years ago. So, we have to deliver change and improvement, which comes partly through capacity improvements—a lot of money is being spent on the Thameslink route. It also comes through better performance on a day-to-day basis. I will never be afraid to hold rail companies’ feet to the fire if they do not deliver, but we also need to recognise that many of the problems arise on the infrastructure, and getting the two to work together to deliver real solutions to those problems has to be the right way forward.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Secretary of State has said that he wants less contracting complexity and more localised decision making, but giving more power over infrastructure to private train operating companies will create a new and uneven layer of contracting in the industry. How can he be confident that this will not lead to a return of the subcontracting culture, which was a major factor in the avoidable rail tragedies at Hatfield and Potters Bar?

Chris Grayling: I do not think the hon. Lady has been listening to me. I am not talking about creating complex new contracting structures; I am talking about teamwork on the ground. Where we have started this—the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) made the point about the situation in Scotland—it has made a difference. We need to deepen and strengthen these alliances, and create much stronger teamwork on the front line. That is what will make a difference.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I, too, welcome this announcement, including the proposal to involve Kent County Council more in the renewal of the Southeastern franchise. Day in, day out, rail commuters in my constituency have to cope with delays, to the extent that one constituent has even asked the managing director of Southeastern to write to his boss to explain why he is late each day. Will the Secretary of State therefore say more about how his proposals will enable my constituents to get to work on time?

Chris Grayling: I know that there has been disruption in the Kent area in the past couple of years because of the improvements at London Bridge, and there are lessons to be learned from the way they have been carried out to make sure that we minimise disruption in the future. We need big investments that will create extra capacity, but they have to be done in a way that causes as little damage as possible to ongoing services. I want the new franchise to deliver the best possible improvements to services in Kent and London, which is one reason why I reached the view that the design of the franchise has to be a three-way partnership between my Department, Transport for London and Kent, because this multifaceted franchise has to work for everyone.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In east Yorkshire did we not have a plan for joined-up thinking, using a train operator called First Hull Trains to improve services for local people by electrifying the line to Hull? Was not that joined-up thinking abandoned by the Government just a few weeks ago?

Chris Grayling: What actually happened was that before the point of being able to take a decision on electrification on the Hull line, Hull Trains and TransPennine ordered bi-mode trains that deliver the service improvements without any additional investment in unnecessary infrastructure. That means we can spend more money around the network to improve services. People in Hull should be pleased, because they are about to get smart new trains that will really improve services.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): We would all welcome more integrated teams working on behalf of passengers on our railways. Will the Secretary of State explain how this will work for my local passengers on the trans-Pennine route, bearing in mind that the Northern franchise runs out in 2025 and the TransPennine Express franchise runs out in 2023?

Chris Grayling: The central focus is likely to be the Northern franchise, and indeed that was Nicola Shaw’s recommendation. A large part of the rail network is relatively easy to deliver in this way, but in some parts where there are multiple operators we need to look carefully at how best to do it. The integrity and the spread of the Northern franchise is probably the foundation for the strongest alliance in that area.
Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Secretary of State has mentioned South West Trains and how some of this integration is already in place in our network. So either we are talking about that, in which case this is not really a change, or this is the predecessor to a privatisation which will go badly—which is it?

Chris Grayling: It could just be that we have had some tentative steps in this direction that have shown early signs of promise and that we think we should pursue much more seriously—it could just be that.

James Cleverly (Brain tree) (Con): Commuters on the Brain tree to Liverpool Street line suffer cancellations and delays far too regularly. I welcome the commitment to new rolling stock under the new franchise, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the bringing together of new rolling stock under the new franchise, but does it mean that there will be problems—that is unavoidable in a congested rail system—but we all want to know that there are no excuses, be they about rolling stock, signalling or points, to further delay the commuters in my constituency?

Chris Grayling: I agree; what the public want is to know that someone is in charge. The aim of all this is to ensure that someone is in charge. Things will go wrong and there will be problems—that is unavoidable in a congested rail system—but we all want to know that there is a joined-up team trying to solve them. Of course, I hope that the new trains on my hon. Friend’s network, once they arrive and have bedded in, will deliver much better reliability than the existing ones.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Will this new arrangement have any impact on future investment decisions? I note that the east midlands franchise is to be one of the first considered for this new arrangement, so how does that impact on possible electrification there? A scheme was committed to and then paused, and then unpased and recommitted to. Now it appears to be neither paused nor committed to. Will the Secretary of State explain the impact on that of these arrangements?

Chris Grayling: There is no impact; as I have said in the House before, we are proceeding with the next stage of electrification to Corby. We are looking at how we deliver service improvements to Sheffield by 2020, with improved journey times, faster tracks and the remodelling of key places such as Derby station, and I am looking actively at how we provide the best train fleet for the future.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I have been campaigning for the reopening of the east-west rail line for many years, so may I thank my right hon. Friend for this early Christmas present? Will he assure me that the new body will work closely with the National Infrastructure Commission on unlocking the economic potential of the Oxford to Cambridge corridor through Milton Keynes? Do we have an updated likely date for the opening of the line?

Chris Grayling: We will work with the National Infrastructure Commission, and we will also work closely with the local authorities that have been involved in helping to develop the project. I will not give my hon. Friend a date, but I would say that one reason for doing this is that I want to accelerate the process. I look at the pipeline of projects that Network Rail has, and I do not want this project to disappear into the middle of the next decade; I want us to start real improvement works quickly. We have money from the autumn statement to start some of that work and the intersection with the HS2, but I just want to make this project happen quickly. We have to demonstrate sometimes in this country that we can get on with things.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My constituency and the north Wales line are covered by two major franchises, Wales and borders, and west coast; by two Governments, the Welsh Government and the UK Government; and by Network Rail. In future, under the Secretary of State’s plans, who would be responsible for safety? Has he spoken to the Welsh Government about that?

Chris Grayling: Today’s announcement is predominantly about England, because, as the hon. Gentleman knows, the Welsh Government are taking the lead in designing the franchise. I know that they have sympathy with this view, because they are pathfinders at the moment in securing bids from integrated consortiums for the proposed Cardiff metro service, but I will discuss this with the Welsh Government, as I have regular conversations with them. I hope that they may want to build on some of the things we are seeking to do in England.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Secretary of State’s decision to reintegrate train and track, where appropriate, is sensible. Does he accept, however, that my constituents will regard his failure to remove the London metro services from the wholly discredited Southeastern franchise as a complete cop-out and failure, and that it makes sense at all, as far as rail users in my constituency or I am concerned?

Chris Grayling: I know that my hon. Friend feels passionately about this, but I do not agree with him. We will have the opportunity, between London, my Department and Kent, to design an improved franchise for the future. What I had to decide was whether the benefits set out in the Mayor’s business plan, which did not involve increases in capacity on my hon. Friend’s local routes into London, and the incremental improvements that Transport for London claimed it might be able to deliver were really worth putting his railway line through the biggest restructuring since the 1920s. My judgment is that we can achieve the benefits that TfL is arguing for through partnership, rather than through massive reorganisation, and that is my aim.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What evaluation has there been of the time and cost benefits of doing the Oxford to Cambridge line in the way that the Secretary of State proposes, as opposed to having Network Rail do it? Does he envisage other projects being run in this way? If this is about looking for different ways of doing things, will he consider allowing the public sector to bid for train franchises?

Chris Grayling: As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware from the autumn statement, the Oxford-Cambridge Corridor is a much broader project than just a railway line. It is seen as a key development corridor by the Treasury and the National Infrastructure Commission. We also need to look at the construction of improved
road links between the two, so it is much more complicated than simply saying, “It's a railway line.” However, we need to build a model that secures developer contributions on the route. It is good for our rail sector to have a bit of contestability. The assumption that Network Rail should always do everything does not give us any benchmarks to judge whether someone else can do it better. I want to use this as an opportunity, in a way that does not affect the rest of the network, to test the way that we are doing things, and to see whether we can do them quicker and better.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Passengers in my constituency just want a better service—one that matches the train timetable—and this is something that I have raised with the Secretary of State on a number of occasions. I agree that both track and train teams need to work together to focus on delivering a better service, especially on the Upfield line. What improvements will my constituents see with this new initiative?

Chris Grayling: One thing I asked Chris Gibb to do around the Southern route was to start to create the kind of partnership that I have described today. My early experience on this route—and the early experience of the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard)—was that Network Rail and the train operator were not working closely together and not addressing problems together. Sadly, the real challenge in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) is the ongoing industrial action, which is utterly pointless. No one is losing their job, and no one is losing any money; this is all about adopting new technologies and ways of working that are already custom and practice on the same routes. The action is a tragedy, and it is unacceptable. I again call on the unions to go back to work.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): When Transport for London took over London Overground, it went from being the worst performing rail line in the country to the best performing rail line. That was why the Government signed an agreement with TfL and the London government in March for TfL to take over Southeastern when the franchise expires in 2018. What exactly has happened to make the Government break their promise to Londoners?

Chris Grayling: I looked very carefully at this matter. The hon. Lady needs to understand the difference between London Overground and the rest of the suburban routes. London Overground has provided a good service, which is run by Arriva—part of the German railways—and was co-run initially by MTR, the Hong Kong metro system. It is a franchise operator, like the rest. Having read the Mayor's business case carefully, and having considered the level of change required to split the franchise in half—it would be the biggest operating change on this railway since the 1920s—and the potential disruption to passengers over a period of time, I thought, rightly or wrongly, that we could deliver the service improvement that TfL was talking about by forging a partnership. Crucially, we would involve Kent, because this is not a London issue; as this railway runs from London to the south coast, we cannot think of the railway system just in terms of London. Very many passengers and representatives in this House from further afield would take a very different view from her on what will work for the railway line.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): May I welcome the Secretary of State's pragmatic approach to this problem? We on the Conservative Benches believe in devolution and in providing different solutions depending on the circumstances. The west coast main line is working at almost 100% capacity. Will he explain to my constituents how London Midland, Virgin and Network Rail on the west coast main line will work better together through his proposals?

Chris Grayling: There are two issues here. Clearly, there is logic, for the midlands and the north, in having a really joined-up relationship between Network Rail and the local train operator. Of course there will be services, such as Virgin's west coast main line and the CrossCountry service, that cross boundaries. We must preserve the existing regulatory framework so that those services are not affected by this. My hon. Friend talked about devolution; what I am talking about for London is exactly the same model that we have adopted for transport in the north and the midlands of partnership and of shaping franchises. Local designer franchises have played a big part in the north in delivering what is genuinely thought to be a great new franchise structure that will bring real improvements for people across the north of England.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Just a couple of weeks after the autumn statement, which was supposed to herald new investment in infrastructure, the new Secretary of State has given the game away with today's announcement that the new rail line between Oxford and Cambridge will be built with private investment, so his true colours are shining through. Let me take him back to his comments about the success of ScotRail Alliance and ask him this: if it is working so well now, would it not work even better if we removed more interfaces and fully devolved Network Rail in Scotland to the Scottish Government?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman talks about investment and true colours. My view is this: the public sector is already putting a vast amount of investment into the railways. I support that, and I will get as much investment as I possibly can for our transport system, but there is no harm in also trying to do more by supplementing that with private finance. That may be an ideological division between us, but I cannot see how our transport system loses by having some private finance alongside the huge amounts of public finance already going into the sector.

Suella Fernandes ( Fareham) (Con): Network Rail recently carried out upgrades worth £3 million on the line running through Fareham in my constituency. Does the Secretary of State agree that this announcement will mean a greater focus on passengers? There are still so many commuters from Fareham who struggle because of the troubles with Southern rail. A more joined-up
and co-ordinated approach will be a step in the right direction towards ensuring that commuters have better journeys to work.

**Chris Grayling:** Three things need to happen to deal with the issues on Southern. The first is that we need much more joined-up working. Secondly, we will have to put more money into the Southern infrastructure, which is clearly under great stress. It is a very intensively used railway, and not enough has been spent on it over the years. Above all, we just need to get the workforce back to work. The bizarre thing is that the 10-coach train that I often take to Victoria in the morning has a driver and no guard, and it has been like that for years. Why on earth are the drivers and the guards on Southern putting the passengers through such enormous distress when no one is in danger of losing their job? It is shocking. I would like to hear one word of condemnation from the Labour party. Do we ever hear any condemnation of its union paymasters? The answer is no, not for a moment.

**Heidi Alexander** (Lewisham East) (Lab): When Zac Goldsmith was standing as the Conservative candidate for Mayor of London, the Department for Transport was all for the idea of devolving responsibility for letting Southeastern's franchise to TfL, but now that he has gone, the promise seems to have gone as well. Why are the Government jettisoning the practical improvements that could have been associated with devolution in favour of this political experiment?

**Chris Grayling:** The hon. Lady talks about political experiments; a political experiment would be implementing a business plan that I did not judge delivered substantial improvements to passengers, and that involved the biggest shake-up of the railways in the south-east since the 1920s. That is a risk that we do not need to take. We can deliver improvements through partnership, but we must remember that that partnership is not just about London; it is about Kent. It is a partnership that involves passengers on different parts of the routes. We need to design a franchise structure that delivers improvements for everyone.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Passengers on the diesel-operated East Midlands Trains franchise from London to Kettering, who already experience some of the most expensive fares per mile in the country, often have delays to their service, not because of anything that East Midlands Trains has done, but because of Network Rail problems with the overhead lines coming out of St Pancras for the Thameslink service. That often happens at Luton and Bedford as well. Will the Secretary of State ensure that East Midlands Trains, Thameslink trains and Network Rail are among the first to set up these joint operating arrangements, because that would be greatly welcomed by my Kettering constituents?

**Chris Grayling:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that will be the case; that is one of the franchises that is coming up to be let. Big improvements are needed on that route. One of the other things that is unsatisfactory about the service for his constituents in Kettering is that in the mornings, they have to pile on to crammed inter-city trains from much further north in the east midlands. What we aim to deliver by 2020 is a better inter-city service and, for the first time, a proper dedicated commuter service to people from Corby, Kettering, Wellingborough and further south.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): From what I can gather, integration is at the heart of what the Secretary of State is endeavouring to achieve. With that in mind, now that the UK Government are devolving responsibilities for the Welsh franchise to Wales, is it not logical to devolve responsibility for the Welsh network?

**Chris Grayling:** I need to correct the hon. Gentleman on that: we are not devolving responsibility for the whole Welsh franchise as he describes; we are doing so in part. I have said to the Welsh Government that I am happy with their taking control of the Welsh valleys lines, with a view to developing the metro system that they hope to put into service, but the Welsh franchise is not purely Welsh; it runs through large parts of England as well. We cannot have a situation where we, the Government in Westminster, give up control over services in England to the Welsh Government without checks and balances. That is not going to happen.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement today of greater alignment between track and train operators. It seems that in the past fortnight or so Southern and Thameslink passengers have suffered a lot of broken rail reports—almost more reports in that period than in the last year. How can the new model help to address that situation?

**Chris Grayling:** The incidence of broken rails is a worrying coincidence, to put it mildly. I am concerned about the number of infrastructure breakdowns in recent weeks. Passengers blame the train company, but often—recently, more often than not—it is an infrastructure problem. That route is suffering intensely from low-level industrial action on non-strike days, and effectively a work to rule has been in force on different parts of that railway for months, which is adding to the intense pressure. I wish the unions would just accept that their members are not losing as a result of the change. They have more job security and better pay than a lot of people in the south-east, and they should get back to work and do the job they need to do for their passengers.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): The travelling public support devolution, as do a number of Conservative MPs, council leaders and Assembly Members, and indeed as the Conservative Government did when they signed the joint prospectus with the previous Mayor of London. Is it not just a narrow, petty, political point that the right hon. Gentleman does not want to devolve to a Labour Mayor, who would provide more frequent trains, fewer delays and cancellations, more staff at stations and frozen fares?

**Chris Grayling:** This is the problem with the proposition. The hon. Gentleman says that more frequent trains would be provided, but the Mayor's business plan did not provide more frequent trains. It provided no extra capacity in peak hours into the stations that serve the Southeastern route, and it would have involved the biggest reorganisation of those routes since the 1920s. My judgment is that, as it does not deliver the more
frequent trains the hon. Gentleman describes, rather than upheaval.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): As the Secretary of State is well aware, there are appalling problems on Southern rail, which have been going on for a significant period and made worse by the apparent inability of Network Rail and GTR to work together. May I welcome his work with Chris Gibb and his pragmatic approach both to that and to the unions?

Chris Grayling: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s comments. One of the breakdowns last week was caused by a piece of equipment being left behind from engineering work being done to sort out the problems in the Balcombe tunnel, which contribute to the unreliability on that network. Some of the money I announced in September is now being spent operationally on the ground. It is frustrating when it has an unfortunate accidental wrong effect.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State tell us when the electrification work between Cardiff and Swansea will be finished?

Chris Grayling: As I have said to the hon. Gentleman before, I make no bones about my unhappiness with the progress of Great Western electrification, which has not been anything like what I had hoped for. My policy right now is to deliver for him the new trains and improved journey times that will result from where we have got to so far, and where we hope we will get to soon in the electrification programme. He knows that what will make the biggest different to Swansea is fast new trains to London.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What are the implications of the proposed partnership on the east midlands franchise for smaller capital schemes such as the one for level access at Alfreton station, which was scandalously delayed by Network Rail last week?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend will know that where more enlightened train operators have invested and made improvements, it has paid dividends for them—Chiltern Railways is the obvious example. I hope that with more autonomy for the Network Rail team on the ground and autonomy for the private sector operators, they will look together at small schemes that will make a real difference to passengers and can be afforded within local budgets.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Proposals to devolve rail services in London were championed by the Secretary of State’s predecessor, were underpinned by a solid business case, had cross-party support inside and outside London and, most important, were incredibly popular among passengers in London and Kent, who suffer daily at the hands of Southeastern and its unreliable and overcrowded services. Does the Secretary of State accept that his decision to take the proposal off the table today will be seen by those passengers as a betrayal of the hopes and expectations that were raised earlier this year by the Government?

Chris Grayling: No, I do not accept that. As I keep saying, the business plan submitted by the Mayor did not deliver extra capacity. I have invited Transport for London and Kent County Council to work alongside us on designing a franchise that maximises performance, takes advantage of any best practice we can learn from, and works for London and for Kent. Both are important.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): People in Corby and east Northamptonshire are delighted with the Government’s commitment to electrification of the midland main line and pleased with the track upgrades in recent weeks. As part of the reletting of the franchise, they would like more trains running northbound and southbound through Corby. What benefit does my right hon. Friend envisage this greater co-operation having, in terms of responding most effectively to local concern and demand?

Chris Grayling: We know that often on the railways, as on the roads, it is the small things that make a real difference. I hope that with decentralisation of Network Rail into a route-based structure, the autonomous local managing directors who have their own budgets will be much better placed to apply small amounts of money to small schemes that make a material difference to passengers. I believe that the approach we propose will make that more likely. There is a real opportunity for the east midlands to be early beneficiaries of this approach.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The question for patience and perseverance goes to Ian Lucas.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Transport for London and Merseyrail are successful vertically integrated train companies. Why, if we want more integration, do we not apply their successful model, which attracts public and private investment, to the rest of our railway network?

Chris Grayling: I hate to disabuse the hon. Gentleman, but Merseyrail is not a vertically integrated train operator. Indeed, I have discussed with Merseyrail whether it wants to take control of its tracks, and so far it has been indicated to me, at least by the Mayor of Liverpool, that he does not particularly want to. I would be happy if Merseyrail took control of its tracks. It has long had the opportunity to become an integrated train operator, but right now, it is not.
Casey Report

1.17 pm  
Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government if he will make a statement on the Government’s initial reaction to the recommendations in the Casey report and indicate what process the Government will now adopt for detailed consideration of its proposals and their implementation.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In July 2015, the Government asked Dame Louise Casey to conduct an independent review of opportunity and integration in the UK. Her report was published yesterday. Once again, I thank Dame Louise for her thorough and diligent work over the past 18 months. Many of her findings ring true to me personally. I have seen for myself the enormous contribution that immigrants and their families make to British life, all without giving up their unique cultural identities, but I have also seen with my own eyes the other side of the equation. For too long, too many people in this country have been living parallel lives, refusing to integrate and failing to embrace the shared values that make Britain great; and for too long, too many politicians in this country have refused to deal with the problem, ducking the issue for fear of being called a racist and failing the very people they are supposed to help. I will not allow that to continue.

We in public life have a moral responsibility to deal with the situation, and Dame Louise’s report is a crucial step in that process. I am studying her findings closely. The report touches on the work of a number of Departments, so I will discuss it with colleagues across Government more widely. In spring, we will come to the House with our plans for tackling these issues, so that we can continue to build a country that works for everyone.

Mr Betts: I had the pleasure of hosting Louise Casey on a visit to Sheffield, where she identified both the scale and the speed of substantial Slovak Roma migration to the city, which is a significant challenge. She identified that even in Sheffield, which has a history of good community relations, those communities very often live side by side, with very little interaction, let alone any integration. Will the Secretary of State indicate his response to the detailed recommendations of the report, particularly a key recommendation for the creation of a new programme to improve community cohesion, with area-based plans and projects? Does he recognise that such a programme will need targeted funds, rather like the impact funds that the Government abolished?

Does the Secretary of State agree with Louise Casey that speaking English is key to integration? Will he agree to reverse the cuts that have been made to the funds available for courses teaching English as a second language? Does he have a view on the recommendations to promote British values in all communities, especially the values of tolerance and respect for others, which support equality on grounds of sex, sexuality, race and religion?

Given that many of the recommendations are challenging and some may be controversial, will the Secretary of State have a programme to consult elected councils and the different communities in the areas most impacted by the recommendations? Finally, after discussions with Government colleagues, will the right hon. Gentleman come back to this House with an action plan, and maybe even come to the Communities and Local Government Committee to discuss it with us as well?

Sajid Javid: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm words about the report and his welcome for it. I know that this is an issue in which he has personally taken an interest for many years, and I look forward to speaking to him as the Chair of the Select Committee about the report. He will know that this is an independent report, not a statement of Government policy. Naturally, the Government will want to take the right length of time to look at each of the report’s findings and the recommendations that Dame Louise has made.

The hon. Gentleman asked about a number of the recommendations. Let me respond to some of those, without prejudging our response to the report in spring next year. He asked about the area-based plan—a more place-based view. Taking account of local circumstances is just common sense, something the Government already do with their integration and cohesion programmes, but I would like to see how we could make more of that. The hon. Gentleman asked about making resources available. Of course, we will make sure that any recommendation that the Government accept and decide to take forward is suitably resourced.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the importance of English. One of the central recommendations of the report is to make sure that every community in Britain can speak English. I remember, when I was about eight or nine years old, going with my mother when she had to visit the GP and acting as an interpreter for her. Many years later I am pleased to say that she learned English and now speaks it very well. It has transformed her life. It is great news for British society when more and more people who are going to settle here can speak English. I know from personal experience the difference that can make. That is why I am pleased that the Government already spend more than £100 million a year to help people to learn English if it is a foreign language for them. We always have to see what more we can do.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about promoting British values. He is right to stress that, and the report touches on it in a number of areas. He talked particularly about the importance of tolerance and respect, and I am sure he will agree that respect works both ways—respect of all communities for each other, including of immigrant communities for the dominant Christian culture in this country, which is sometimes lacking. We have to make sure that we are promoting British values in every sensible way that we can. We will be looking closely at the report and reporting back on its findings in the spring.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome Louise Casey’s review. It echoes a number of the findings in a recent Women and Equalities Committee report on the challenges that many Muslim people face in getting work in this country. In her report she sets out the fact that women in some communities face a double barrier of gender and religion preventing them from accessing even basic rights as British residents. How are the Secretary of State and the Government ensuring that
every person in this country is afforded the protection of the Equality Act 2010 and of their rights under the law of this country?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is right to raise the issue. She speaks with great experience and has done a lot to promote equality in this country through her work as a Minister and on the Back Benches. She speaks of the double barrier faced by some women. The report talks about the challenges facing Muslim women in particular. More needs to be done in that regard, not just directly by Government; it is a challenge also to Muslim communities, and particularly to some Muslim men, as to how they treat Muslim women. These findings are extremely important. We should take them seriously and see what more we can do.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee for asking this important urgent question. For too long as a country we have ignored these complex issues for fear of being seen as racist or as attacking cultural attitudes. Sadly, this approach has left a vacuum that has been exploited by those who exist to promote hatred. It is time that we recognised the problems and opportunities highlighted in the Casey report and addressed them in a realistic and mature way.

One of the issues that was highlighted by the Chair of the Select Committee was the ability to speak English. One of the most concerning aspects of the report is how women in some communities are denied equal rights and opportunities. We are constantly urging people who suffer sexual abuse or violence to speak out, but they cannot speak out if they cannot speak English. If they cannot speak English, they cannot even ring 999. Yet the Casey report found that the Department for Communities and Local Government spent more on promoting the Cornish language between 2011 and 2013 than it did on promoting English. Does the Secretary of State now believe that ESOL classes should not have been scrapped? In the light of this report and of his own experience as a young man, will he commit to reinstituting ESOL?

The report highlights the fact that communities have been left behind. It is not acceptable to blame the people living in those communities for that, when many of the projects recommended in the report that would empower marginalised women, promote social mixing and tackle barriers to employment for the most socially isolated groups have been scrapped over the past six years as a result of devastating cuts to local government. Does the Secretary of State recognise that cuts to local government funding have contributed to these problems, and will he push for fairer funding in the coming spending review?

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with the Muslim Council of Britain that although any initiatives that facilitate better integration of all Britons should be welcomed, taken as a whole the report could be perceived as a missed opportunity to emphasise that integration requires the active participation of all Britons?

The report looked at education, recommending strong safeguards for children not in mainstream education. Will the Secretary of State outline what is being done by his Department and other Departments to make sure that those children are safeguarded?

Sajid Javid: I am pleased that the hon. Lady agrees that many of the issues raised in the report have been ignored for too long by too many politicians on both sides of the House. It is good that there is general agreement on that. By taking the report as an important first step, we can start to deal together with some of the issues.

The hon. Lady asked about English language. I am a little disappointed that having started by saying that we should take a mature approach, she then made the point about the Cornish language. If she had looked more closely, she would have seen that it was an entirely misleading headline. She spoke about spending on languages by my Department, so I will tell her the facts. In the past six years the Department has spent £780,000 on the Cornish language, but in the past five years it has spent £11 million on community-based English language programmes. On top of that, the rest of the Government has spent hundreds of millions of pounds on supporting English. If we are to have a proper debate, the hon. Lady would be well advised to stick to the facts and use them in the debate.

The hon. Lady asked whether there will be fairer funding for local government. She should know that there is currently a local government fairer funding review, which will report early next year. On the Muslim Council of Britain and some of its early comments on the report, it is important to highlight that I certainly want to speak with all groups, including the Muslim Council of Britain and many others, that want to comment on the report and make suggestions on how we can take integration and cohesion forward.

The hon. Lady also asked about safeguarding, particularly of young Muslims who might be vulnerable in some way. She will know that the Prevent programme is exactly that: a safeguarding programme. That is something I hope the whole House can support.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can sharia be a voluntary choice for women lacking in English in closed communities?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend raises an important issue that came up in the report. It is worth reminding the House that sharia councils are not courts in England and Wales; they cannot legally enforce any decisions and they must, of course, operate within the national law. However, the report has highlighted some legitimate issues. That is why I am pleased that the Government have already started a full, independent review of sharia law in England and Wales, and I look forward to reading its conclusions.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Dame Louise’s extensive report comes at an interesting time, with Brexit exacerbating hate crime and Government and tabloid rhetoric ramping up. I am particularly thankful that at least in Scotland we have political leadership at all levels, whether that be the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, who has made welcome those new Scots who have chosen Scotland and given us the tremendous honour of making Scotland their home; Glasgow City Council, which put up its front door a banner proclaiming that refugees are welcome; or the range of community initiatives across the country, such as Refuweegee, which fosters integration. The challenges of migration—

[Interruption.]
Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Why is there so much noise in the Chamber when the hon. Lady is speaking from the Front Bench? She must be listened to.

Alison Thewliss: The challenges of migration are highlighted in the review, but again and again this Tory Government have been found lacking, and in some cases they are the cause. Ending austerity is the best thing this Government could do to tackle social exclusion and promote integration. Will the Secretary of State challenge the toxic rhetoric that pits groups in our society against each other? Will he look to Scotland to see how the strategies that we are implementing are providing opportunities for people to share experiences? Will he reverse the damaging cuts to ESOL, which other Members have mentioned, and will he refuse to accept the offensive suggestion that we require an integration oath?

Sajid Javid: It is a shame that the hon. Lady has to be so party political about this matter. When she can act in a more mature fashion, and when she and the Scottish National party have something useful to say, I will respond.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Has the Secretary of State had the opportunity to listen to two important radio programmes on the Deobandis—they are still available on the internet—that were broadcast by the BBC a year or so ago? They shine an important light on some of the problems that affect us. Will he join me in welcoming the section of the report on the Prevent strategy, and Louise Casey’s statement that the public servants delivering it “should be proud and unapologetic about the important work they do to keep us safe”?

Sajid Javid: I have not listened to those radio programmes on the plight of the Deobandis, but I am well aware of the issues faced by that community. My right hon. Friend is right to highlight it in the House. The report is a reminder of all the communities that we can help through Government action. I am pleased to hear of his support for the Prevent programme. He has been a supporter of it for a while, and that is because he knows that it works.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The Secretary of State has referred to the Prevent strategy. In relation to children who are home schooled, can he please explain how that operates and how success is measured?

Sajid Javid: Home schooling, as the hon. Lady will know, is an important and valuable option that we offer in this country. My hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards is here and has heard her question, and I am sure that he will respond.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome the report, but one of my concerns is that it contains no reflections on the future of faith schools, and therefore the integration of young people across faiths, which I hope we will look at in particular. Can we take urgent action on one of the recommendations, which is that children who are withdrawn from school and educated at home might not receive the sort of education that we would like them to receive? Those children are at risk right now and we need to take urgent action.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are looking at unregistered settings, and once that review is complete it will help us deal with the kinds of issues he is concerned about. He talked more generally about faith schools, which are a hugely important part of our education system. They provide variety, but so many people choose them because, by and large, they are excellent schools. Many of them do a great job of promoting integration. One of my brothers, as a Muslim, went to a Roman Catholic school, and it taught him a lot about British society and British values. I think that we should find good practice and see what we can do to promote it.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Louise Casey is right to call out misogyny as one of the ways in which women from minority ethnic communities are socially excluded—not an issue that some of us have ever ignored—but will the Secretary of State talk to the Home Secretary about the misogynist practices of the Home Office? First of all, it excludes wives who come from overseas from accessing free ESOL for the first two years they are here. Secondly, what about those women in Britain who have been exploited by husbands cheating their way into Britain on a marriage ticket? The Home Office refuses to tell the wives, who are British citizens, what has happened to their husbands, and it refuses to collaborate with those women in reporting their husbands and removing them when it should do.

Sajid Javid: Unfortunately, I do not recognise much of what the right hon. Lady is talking about. Again, she would do well to stick to the facts. For example, she talks about helping women to learn English when they come to Britain. As hon. Members have mentioned, English is hugely important for integration, which is why the Government have put in place a requirement that anyone wishing to settle permanently in this country must first be able to speak English.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): The report states: “Too many public institutions, national and local, state and non-state, have gone so far to accommodate diversity and freedom of expression that they have ignored or even condoned regressive, divisive and harmful cultural and religious practices, for fear of being branded racist or Islamicophobic.” Does the Secretary of State agree that there is now a great opportunity for the Government to take the lead in forging a common, modern British identity that new arrivals must sign up to if integration is really going to work?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. As I said at the start—I am pleased to hear that she agrees—politicians, collectively, have for too long ignored this issue and there has been a fear of being branded racist, and clearly that is unacceptable. This is an excellent opportunity for us to build on.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Integration, of course, is a two-way process, and it can be assisted by central Government but has to be delivered at a local level. May I suggest to the Secretary of State that something he could do to respond to the Casey report would be to give the regional mayors in the west midlands the power to administer the training levy? They are best placed to know what kinds of employment opportunities and integration projects for better training and education should be applied.
Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right about the importance of having local flexibility and control over many integration programmes. She might be aware of the ‘Near Neighbours’ programme, which has thousands of projects all run locally, often involving voluntary groups and local authorities, which I think is a good example of that. She has made a suggestion and I have listened carefully.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): The Minister will be aware that the last two Muslims to be murdered in hate crimes were murdered not by Brexit supporters but by other Muslims. Does that not show the importance of implementing this report and demanding that all communities sign up to gay rights, women’s rights and the right to interpret religion in any way one wishes?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend highlights the importance of promoting British values and making sure that they are accepted by all communities in Britain. That includes tolerance, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, respect for democracy and so many other things. The more we can do to make sure that every community embraces those, the better off we will all be.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I do not recognise the description of the Muslim community that is painted in this report in respect of my home city of Leicester, where 20% are of Muslim origin and 50% are from the ethnic minority communities. The Secretary of State and I have been to many dinners and other events for the ethnic minority communities, and he will know that what those communities want more than anything else is to belong, to integrate and to be ambitious for their children. In which country of the world can the son of a bus driver be a Secretary of State in the Cabinet and be talked about as a potential Prime Minister? In which country of the world can four Muslim women be sitting in Parliament today representing all their constituents? While accepting what the report says, let us also be positive about the huge contribution that the ethnic minority communities have made, which has made this country great.

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the massive and positive contribution that immigrants through the decades have made to our great country and how they have made our country stronger still. He referred specifically to Muslim communities, including in his own constituency, and I think he will recognise that a lot of the issues and challenges affect a minority of the Muslim community. I think—well, I know, factually—that many members of the Muslim community recognise that there are problems and challenges that are particular to their own community, and they, as much as the right hon. Gentleman, myself and others in the House, want to deal with that.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): In Bradford, we have issues of segregation and integration in our communities. I very much welcome the report and what the Secretary of State has said today. Could I invite him to come along to Bradford sometime next year to see what the Government can do to help local communities with their desire for more community cohesion and integration? In the meantime, can he be very firm with local authorities to stop them translating documents into lots of different languages and insist that those documents are all in English only?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend highlights some of the challenges, particularly in his own constituency, of segregation and lack of integration, but I know that he will also be one of the first to accept that different communities have helped his constituency in so many ways and brought so much for people to celebrate. I will be more than happy to come to Bradford to look at both issues with him.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): While I second the invitation to Bradford from my colleague, the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), I do not second the other half of his question. How will the Minister address the structural inequalities affecting Muslim communities, and especially Muslim women, which frustrate their aspiration of progressive engagement with society?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that a number of programmes are already in place. Since 2011-12, the Government have spent £60 million on integration and cohesion programmes, including teaching the English language to isolated communities, with many of those involved being women. However, we always have to see what more we can do, and there are some suggestions in this report. It would be wrong of me not to study them carefully and not to look at which ones to take forward and implement, and I look forward to doing that. If the hon. Lady has particular suggestions once she has looked at the report in detail, I would be happy to listen to them.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Sport does so much to break down barriers, bring people together and help promote British values in our society on an organic basis, so although we have a proud record on this in this country, will the Secretary of State see what more can be done, working across Government, to help boost sporting participation, particularly among young people?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. When I was Culture Secretary, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport sponsored a number of programmes, particularly in cricket and football, that involved a number of young Asian men, and that did help with community integration and cohesion. He is right to raise the issue again, and we should be looking across the board to see how every Government Department can help.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I fear that the Secretary of State’s fine words mask little-England identity politics. Can he assure me, as a south-east Londoner representing the most Welsh-speaking constituency for Plaid Cymru, that British values do not equate to a British state-imposed identity, and can he commit to bringing forward a strategy addressing poverty, inequality and inter-community respect?

Sajid Javid: I think the hon. Lady knows full well what British values mean, and they mean values for every part of the United Kingdom.
Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I agree with the Secretary of State that, for too long, we have had a soft-headed attitude towards integration, which has led to segregated communities up and down this country. I know that he has already been asked about faith schools, but could he spend some more time looking at the report, because I share its concern that faith schools further isolate young children? Does he agree that the report deserves a serious and determined response?

Sajid Javid: First, I thank my hon. Friend for the work she has already done to campaign on so many of the issues raised in this report, and I look forward to speaking to her in detail about the report and considering the recommendations. She raised the issue of faith schools, which, as she knows, is mentioned in the report. It is something that we want to look at carefully, and it is certainly something I will be discussing with my colleagues in Government.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Young Muslim women I have met in my constituency at the al-Hikmah centre and at Batley Girls’ High School are engaging and whip-smart. They are held back not by lack of integration but by lack of opportunity. Will the Secretary of State therefore look particularly closely at the recommendation to provide additional funding for area-based plans to empower marginalised women and promote social mobility?

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of opportunity—the report is about opportunity and integration. We always have to look across Government to see what more we can do to promote opportunities for all communities, including young Muslim women. The hon. Lady described young Muslim women she has met, who sound absolutely fantastic and model citizens, but I think she will recognise that there are also young Muslim women who are being held back—sometimes by members of their own family or members of their own community. For example, as we have seen in this report, and as I have seen from bitter experience over a long time, women have been held back because they have been asked to go out with chaperones, because they are told to dress in a certain way, or because they are told that they cannot take certain jobs or that they should not go to university or pursue higher education. We want to make sure we tackle those issues as well, and I know the hon. Lady agrees with that.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, while Britain should always remain a tolerant and diverse nation, it is also important that new communities feel an obligation to integrate and embrace a common British identity, and that we should never use the excuse of multiculturalism to tolerate practices that are clearly not in accordance with British laws, values and customs?

Sajid Javid: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I think we all realise—the report highlights this—that mistakes were made in the past. We could collectively, as politicians, have done a much better job in helping to settle and integrate new arrivals and new communities in Britain, and we should now learn from that. Looking forward, there are some interesting suggestions in the report about how we can do that, and I will be taking them very seriously.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I remember that when language classes were provided for immigrant women in Oxford, the same women went to the same classes year after year without showing any improvement in their ability to speak English. Does the report not point to the fact that it is a question not of throwing money at this, but of making language tuition effective?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend. We must make sure that the money—we—the taxpayer—are currently spending on helping people to learn English is spent effectively, which is about making sure the programmes currently in place are effective. We must make sure that any new initiatives that we come up with as we plough through the report are effective in tackling that problem.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The report quite rightly highlights the good work of organisations such as Tell MAMA and the Community Security Trust, and it also draws attention to the upsurge of violence against people from Poland and elsewhere in recent months. Will the Secretary of State have urgent discussions with his Home Office colleagues about how to reduce the impact of the poisonous ideologies that come from other countries and cause tensions and even deaths, as we saw in Glasgow, in this country?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman mentioned two organisations—Tell MAMA and the CST—that are very effective and valuable, and the Government are proud to support them in the work they do. There are many other such organisations. That highlights the fact that dealing with these issues requires lots of groups and stakeholders, including voluntary organisations, to come together.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to meet the Home Secretary. I assure him that I regularly discuss these issues with the Home Secretary; we have a mutual interest in them. He may be interested to know that very recently—just two or three weeks ago—the Home Secretary and I jointly chaired a hate crime action panel, to which we invited a number of groups, including the two he mentioned, to discuss what more we can do.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I have read the Casey review, which considers many important aspects of integration. The Refugee Council has called for a comprehensive refugee integration strategy, and that is echoed in what we on the all-party group on refugees, which I chair, are finding in our public “Refugees Welcome” inquiry. Refugees have told us that they want to learn English, to work and to integrate, so will the Government support the expansion of the Syrian resettlement programme to create a comprehensive refugee integration strategy?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to raise the importance of making sure that refugees are integrated quickly and properly, and of providing the resources for that. She will know that a number of programmes are in place to do just that. If she believes that there is more that can be done, I am happy to learn more from her.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) on securing this very important urgent question, but I think we could sometimes be a little bit more positive.
about this. In Wellingborough, we have an integrated multicultural community, and we have had it for a very long time. We have Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Christian—both Labour and Conservative—councillors and candidates, and we have temples, mosques and churches. I wonder whether someone from the Secretary of State’s Department might at some point come down to see how this can work well, rather than for us always to concentrate just on where it is going wrong.

**Sajid Javid:** I think that is a very good idea. Again, my hon. Friend highlights something that we should never forget: we are talking about the challenges and how to deal with them, but so many immigrants who, through the ages, have come to this great country have made a huge contribution to our country and made us so much stronger.

**Shabana Mahmood** (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): I welcome all efforts to improve integration in the UK—this is not the first study to find problems in this area—but I am concerned that there is no real understanding in the report of the simple truth that integration is a two-way street and should definitely not be used, as it so often is, as a stick with which to beat the minority communities of Britain. Given that, will the Minister consider what work can be done to understand, as Casey does not, the drivers of isolation? Alongside asking our minority communities to do more, how can we encourage our majority community to play their part too, so that integration can be truly a success for our country?

**Sajid Javid:** I know the hon. Lady feels passionately about these issues. She has thought a lot about them, and I think she will have some good suggestions. I am always very happy to speak to her about this. However, I think it is a bit unfair to Dame Louise Casey to say that she does not recognise that this is a two-way street. Dame Louise has come up with some specific recommendations, and I think we should take them seriously. She recognises—I have discussed this with her in the past, and it is reflected in the report—that there is a role for everyone in all communities to play.

**Richard Fuller** (Bedford) (Con): As Bedford has been home to people of many national origins for many decades, we can see, as the report shows, that some communities follow intergenerational dispersion, with children and grandchildren living away from their grandparents, and that others follow intergenerational proximity, with children and grandchildren living next door to their grandparents. May I draw the Secretary of State’s attention to recommendation 10 on the use of housing policy to encourage dispersion, and will he consider the possibility of using planning policy to encourage the dispersion of places of worship?

**Sajid Javid:** I listened carefully to what my hon. Friend has said. I know from visiting his constituency with him a number of times that he takes these issues very seriously, and that he is able to look at these issues in his constituency and to suggest certain ideas. I will certainly look carefully at recommendation 10.

**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): First, I want to echo the remark made by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) about integration being a two-way process. I want to highlight that the previous Labour Government set up the forced marriage unit and the community cohesion unit—I was involved in establishing both units—which did excellent work in tackling underlying causes, particularly in relation to human rights violations. I urge the Secretary of State to make sure that we provide service providers with the resources to address those issues.

Secondly, on discrimination, ethnic minority graduates are twice as likely as others to be unemployed, as are white working-class graduates. I therefore urge the Secretary of State to prioritise addressing the underlying problems and barriers to equality.

Finally, I want to draw attention to social integration. I have as many challenges in my constituency in encouraging middle-class newcomers to integrate with the settled communities, which are predominately ethnic minority communities, as I do the other way around. We all have a part to play, and if we can connect those communities together through projects, mentoring and engagement, we can genuinely have a two-way process and a practical way to integrate people, rather than stigmatising certain communities—in the case of this report, the Muslim community.

**Sajid Javid:** Again, I know that the hon. Lady speaks from experience. To take her last point first, I know that she has done a lot when it comes to projects and community work and I have seen first-hand how transformative they can be. She is right to raise the issue of work opportunities, and the Government take that seriously. I chair—I did so in my former role of Business Secretary—and I continue to do so—an intergovernmental taskforce on opportunities for black and minority ethnic people, particularly young people. We are looking across Government to see what more can be done.

The hon. Lady also raised the issue of tackling female genital mutilation, forced marriage and other serious crimes of that nature. I think she will agree with me that the Government have taken them seriously. The previous Government did so, and this Government have built on their work. In fact, much of the good work done in recent times was done by the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): May I tell my right hon. Friend that this is his moment? His personal family experience and his sharp intellect mean that he is the right man in the right place at the right time. Dame Louise Casey tackles head-on the problems faced by thousands of Muslim women in this country, many of whom do not speak English, suffer misogyny and domestic violence at home, are oppressed by sharia law and have had their life chances diminished. Will he assure the House that he will not duck the challenge to seize the recommendations in the report and to restore full human rights to this very large cohort of oppressed women?

**Sajid Javid:** I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend that I will not duck the issues and the Government will not duck them. As I said at the start of the urgent question, they have been ignored by too many politicians for far too long, and that is not going to happen.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Secretary of State will know about concerns that Prevent is undermining efforts to integrate the Muslim community.
Will he set out what support the Department is giving to community-led initiatives to identify and prevent radicalisation?

**Sajid Javid**: The Prevent programme plays a valuable role. That is accepted by not only the Government, the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and others, but many local authorities and community leaders. However, I recognise that certain people have a confidence problem with Prevent. We need always to look to see what more we can do to turn that around. Having more people involved in the community locally is one way to do that.

**Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): May I say how much I welcome the presence of the Minister for School Standards on the Front Bench? One of the best examples of community cohesion and togetherness is Moor End Academy, which Ofsted rated excellent. I attended its presentation evening last Thursday. That school has 31 different first languages and it is producing wonderful young people. Will the Secretary of State join me in praising the leadership at the school and, of course, the pupils and parents for everything they do?

**Sajid Javid**: Moor End Academy sounds fantastic. It sounds like we can learn more from its approach, and I look forward to doing that.

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Like other colleagues, I have concerns about integration in my community. That is by no means to say that things are bad, but I have certainly seen things that could get much better, and it is a two-way street. However, I ask the Secretary of State in good faith, where are the resources to do this? Where are the resources to run youth clubs to bring young people together? Where are the resources for the sports projects? Whenever something goes badly wrong, a huge amount of resource is always made available in the aftermath. We need some of that to go in before problems occur.

**Sajid Javid**: First, the report is independent. That means that, although there are several recommendations, we need to go through them carefully to see which ones we can take forward and build on. When I report back by spring, if extra resource is required, we will certainly ensure that it is available.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Obviously, the review was into opportunity and integration, and the report highlighted the persistent disadvantage of white working-class children on free school meals who underperform at school. When the Government produce their report in the spring, will they address that issue as well?

**Sajid Javid**: First, the Department for Education is taking several actions to address that problem, which the hon. Lady is right to raise. She will know that the Prime Minister has also launched a race disparity audit, which looks at all public service across government. I am chairing that process alongside the Minister for the Cabinet Office. That work has just begun, but we are also trying to ascertain how public services are provided and what the outcomes are for all communities, including white working-class boys. We are trying to learn from that information how we can improve and what more we can do.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing)**: The hon. Lady who gets the last word—Chi Onwurah.

**Chi Onwurah**: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is absolutely right to highlight the important role that we all must play in building strong, resilient, integrated and cohesive communities. It is Newcastle’s diverse and united communities that make it such a great city. However, will the Secretary of State also recognise that the toxic combination of scapegoating refugees and migrants for cuts to public services, Muslims for terrorism, minorities for segregation and the white working class for xenophobia builds barriers to integration? Will he take steps to address such attitudes, wherever he may find them?

**Sajid Javid**: Yes, I will. The hon. Lady is right to highlight Newcastle. It is a fantastic city, and one of the reasons for that is its diverse communities and the contribution that they all make to that great city. She is also right to say that there should be no scapegoating. We should be focused on and driven by the facts. The report is full of that, and I look forward to ploughing through it and seeing what more we can do.
Children of Armed Services Personnel (Schools Admission)

*Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)*

2.7 pm

**Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the children of serving members of the armed forces to have a right of high priority admission to schools outside the normal admission rounds; and for connected purposes. It is an honour to present my first ten-minute rule Bill, which is on schools admissions for the children of our armed forces personnel, today, on the feast day of St Nicholas, patron saint of children and sailors. I am bringing this Bill to the House on behalf of tens of thousands of military children across our nation whose lives are challenged, year in, year out, by having to change schools as their parents, who are serving the nation in our armed forces, are moved from role to role around the country and abroad.

St Nicholas is the guardian of children, and I hope very much that we in this House, and the Minister listening today, will agree that we have a collective duty to all those children born to military families to do everything in our power to reduce the educational disadvantages that these school moves create, by ensuring that when they do need to take place, often at very short notice, we have done absolutely everything we can to make the transition as stress-free as possible for parents and child.

This issue was first brought to my attention earlier this year, when a serving Army officer contacted me in my capacity as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant. I take the greatest pleasure and responsibility in holding this role, and I am now privy to the anxieties of many, many military families as they try to keep stable family lives for their kids within the uniquely challenging framework that is being a serving soldier, sailor, airman or airwoman. I am honoured to be able to champion their needs and concerns in the House, as they have no voice of their own as a result of their service. My ten-minute rule Bill highlights just one such concern, which I believe we can, and must, sort out for them.

The Army officer I mentioned was being posted some 200 miles from his existing job, with seven weeks’ notice. Setting aside the other challenges of finding a suitable house near the new base, thereby gaining a postal address from which to organise all other domestic matters, the family had but a few weeks to research local schools and try to get a place for their child. That child is a little boy; let us call him James. James, at the grand old age of six, has lived in four different houses in totally different parts of England, and has been to three different educational establishments already. That means making new friends three times over by the age of six—no mean feat. With all the family support in the world, and parking for a moment the fact that his dad could be sent on deployment at any time, this little boy is being asked to develop levels of resilience that few of us would expect of our own children.

Not only did James’s parents have only a very few weeks to find the right school, fill in the forms and wait for a reply, which happened over the summer holidays,
but they were initially told that their choice—the school closest to their proposed new home, which children from neighbouring houses on the base also attended, thereby giving James understanding and supportive new friends—was not possible. The local authority stated that

“whilst James is a Service child there is no right of entry and an admissions authority is within its rights to refuse admission.”

That struck me not only as extremely stressful for the parents and child, but as going wholly against the armed forces covenant.

On the basis that perhaps a few localised schools were struggling with large numbers of service children arriving all at once, I asked a number of colleagues to ascertain from their local authorities how many of their schools had children in receipt of the service pupil premium, and in what proportions. The results were truly unexpected; they showed, across the board, that there are a very few service children in a very large proportion of any local authority’s schools, regardless of whether they are close to a military base or not. In Northumberland, we have two military bases—RAF Boulmer in my constituency, and Alnemarle barracks in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman). In fact, service children are to be found in only very small numbers, often in ones and twos, in 63% of Northumberland’s 174 schools. In another authority that has more military bases than my own county, the proportion of schools with service pupils is 76%, but only six schools have more than 30 such children in their cohort. A single child arriving or leaving at any point during the academic year would therefore clearly not have a major impact on numbers.

Another distressing part of trying to sort out a place for young James at the parents’ new school of choice was that the local authority stated that it would accept him on to the waiting list, but would not inform the family of whether there was a confirmed place until the first day of term, stating that

“all this relies on there being no further applications for a year 1 place from someone who may fulfil criteria on the Admissions policy ahead of James”.

The family were hopeful that a place would be available, but they could not rely on it, or introduce James to other children whom he might end up in a class with, because the authority refused to give them any certainty. That is not what I would call meeting our commitment to serving personnel and their children.

I am pleased to inform the House that young James’s place was eventually confirmed a week before school started, thanks to the intervention and advocacy of the family’s new MP, but not thanks to any admissions code that would commit councils to providing a firm place for each serving family’s child. I have since learned of many children in similar and worse situations. For instance, a family with two children were offered places in different schools, and the parent does not drive. The proposal was that the child going into reception would just have to be late to school and miss an hour at the end of the day, so that the elder child could be collected on foot. Another child having to move at very short notice was offered a place at a failing school. The mother asked me:

“why is it that Army kids have to endure the worst schools, alongside all the others pressures they experience?”

I now know of several service pupils, some with special needs, who had no school place to go to at all in September.

The present school admissions system is structured towards two admissions per academic year, meaning that any child seeking admission outwith that framework must simply hope that the school they prefer has capacity. That is all well and good, but military families do not have the luxury of timing their moves within school admission timetables. By not taking into account military families’ unique and challenging situations, councils are failing to live up to the commitment they pledged to uphold when they signed the community covenant. Some local authorities think about how to apply their commitment in practical terms, and many do so very well, but others have not moved beyond good intentions. In fact, I know of one local authority that informed a military family battling with school admissions that the armed forces covenant does not apply to it.

Our education system is already geared to acknowledge that some children face exceptional and difficult circumstances, and that they will need priority when it comes to admissions to help to offset the difficulties that they have already faced. That is why looked-after children have top priority when it comes to admissions. The Bill seeks to recognise that military children face significant upheaval and educational disadvantages through no fault of their own, and that they too should have high priority for admissions in light of that. The Bill would have the secondary effect of easing the pressure on military families, who are often faced with short-notice moves and must then work out how to transport their children to schools miles from base because they face disadvantage in the schools admissions system.

Too often, it seems that local authorities push back against the armed forces covenant, despite having signed up to it, leaving families frustrated and deeply anxious, and having to fight appeals, which are sometimes lost, as they also try to change location and military role at very short notice. The schools admissions code is not robust enough to ensure that wherever and whenever a military family has to move, they will find the right schools for their children. We are not doing in practice what we talk about when we say we believe in, and are committed to, the covenant.

I never want to have to hear this again from a serving member of our armed forces who is trying to find a school for their child:

“This just shouldn’t be this hard; I can’t bear putting my boy or myself through this stress every 2 years, so I’m going to leave as soon I am able, even though I love my job”.

At a time when we need to retain as many of our highly trained and committed personnel as possible, allowing barriers such as this to make us risk losing them is unacceptable.

My wonderful grandmother used to say to me when I railed at things that seemed wrong with the world that, while it might not be possible to feed 1,000 starving children, it is almost always possible to feed one. We cannot immediately resolve the plight of those children trapped in Mosul. We cannot be sure that we can give a continuing education to every child in a camp who is displaced from their Syrian home, or ensure that every child is protected from malaria, but I am certain that, with a simple change in the law, we can change the code for school admissions, so that every single British military
child can be guaranteed a place at the right school for him and his family’s unique needs, regardless of the
time of year when they apply for a place, or to which
school they apply, and in whichever year group they
land. Young James and the 40,000 other military children
whose parents put their lives on the line for our safety
and freedom around the world deserve nothing less.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan, Danny Kinahan,
Tom Tugendhat, Ruth Smeeth, Mrs Madeleine Moon,
Kit Malthouse, Sir Gerald Howarth, Mrs Flick Drummond,
Mr James Gray, Tom Blenkinsop, Wes Streeting and
Calum Kerr present the Bill.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan accordingly presented
the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on
Friday 20 January, and to be printed (Bill 109).

Health Service Medical Supplies
(Costs) Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill
Committee

New Clause 1

Review of the impact of the Act on pricing,
research and development, and innovation

“(1) Within six months of this Act coming into force, the
Secretary of State shall commission a review on the impact of the
Act on—

(a) the pricing and availability of medicines and other
medical supplies,
(b) research and development, and
(c) the NHS’s legal duty to promote innovation

and shall lay the report of the review before each House of
Parliament.”—(Justin Madders.)

This new clause would place a duty upon the Secretary of State to
place a report before Parliament on the impact of the Act on the
pricing and availability of medicines and other medical supplies,
research and development and the NHS’s legal duty to promote innovation.

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.18 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I
beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With
this it will be convenient to consider:

Amendment 8, in clause 1, page 1, line 14, at end
insert—

“(2A) In exercising functions in relation to the controls on the
costs of health service medicines, the Secretary of State must
ensure that any payments made by manufacturers or suppliers to
whom the scheme relates calculated by reference to sales or
estimated sales of medicines are utilised solely for the purpose of
reimbursing the NHS for expenditure on medicines and medical
supplies.”

This amendment would confirm that the Secretary of State has a
duty to reinvest rebates in improving access to new and innovative
medicines and treatments.

Amendment 9, in clause 5, page 4, line 5, at end
insert—

“(7) Before making regulations under Clause 5 the Secretary of
State must conduct a consultation on the potential effect of this
clause on the maintenance of quality of those medical supplies,
and seek representations from manufacturers, suppliers and
distributors of medical supplies as part of the consultation.”

Government amendments 1 to 6.

Amendment 10, in clause 6, page 7, line 11, at end
insert—

“(1A) Information provided by virtue of section 264A must be
disclosed by the Secretary of State to persons listed in subsection
(1)(a) to (i) at that person’s request.”

Government amendment 7.

Justin Madders: I rise to speak to new clause 1, which
stands in my name; to amendment 8, which is in the
name of my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie
Cooper); and to the other amendments in the group.

The Opposition do not oppose the Bill. Our proposals
are a constructive attempt to help the Government to
achieve their stated aims, and to close the growing gap
between the UK’s record on developing new drugs and
the ability of NHS patients to access them.
New clause 1 would put a duty on the Secretary of State to commission a review within six months of the Act coming into force, focusing on its impact on the pricing and availability of drugs and medical supplies; on research and development; and on the NHS’s legal duty to promote innovation. The pharmaceutical industry in this country employs more than 70,000 people, in predominantly high-skilled and well-paid jobs—just the sort of jobs Members on both sides of the House would want to encourage and see more of.

This country’s record in the pharmaceutical sector has been one of our great success stories, but we cannot take that success for granted, particularly because investment decisions are often taken by parent companies in other parts of the world. There is considerable unease in the sector about the relatively low take-up of new and innovative medicines by the NHS compared with that in comparable nations, and about the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the future of the European Medicines Agency. A number of major companies have based themselves here because of the EMA, and the worry is that they might wish to follow it if it relocates following Brexit.

The impact assessment for the Bill states, as we might expect, that there will be an impact on the revenue of the pharmaceutical sector, and that it could lead to a reduction in investment in research and development and consequent losses for the UK economy estimated at £1 million per annum.

While we fully agree with what the Government seek to achieve with the Bill, we are mindful of the storm clouds on the horizon. We therefore believe that prudence requires that such a review takes place within a reasonable timeframe to ensure there are no unintended consequences and that we can remain confident that the pharmaceutical sector in this country will continue to be at the forefront. We face competition not only in Europe but from emerging nations such as Brazil and China. We also need to ensure that the NHS does not trail in the take-up of the new drugs. Worryingly, the Office of Health Economics studied 14 high-income countries and found that the UK ranked ninth out of those 14 across all medicines studied.

Successive studies have demonstrated relatively low take-up of new medicines in the UK compared with other countries. That is bad for patients and bad for our pharmaceutical industry. The Bill therefore needs to achieve a balance. We need to ensure the best possible use of the revenues generated by the Bill and the best possible investment in new and innovative medicines for the future of the NHS.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I am intervening in my capacity as chair of the all-party group on diabetes. The diabetes drugs bill is enormous: it runs into hundreds of millions of pounds. I accept what my hon. Friend says—that we need to ensure that pharmaceutical companies are able to invest in the provision of new drugs for diabetes—but there are other choices, such as those relating to lifestyle. Does he agree that they need to be investigated while we look for new drugs?

Justin Madders: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. Indeed, if I had known he was in the Chamber, I would probably have anticipated it. He is absolutely right to raise the issue of diabetes drugs and the need for more measures to improve prevention. I attended the launch of the all-party group’s report last week, at which there were a number of interesting initiatives. The “diabetes village” is an interesting concept, which in the long term will hopefully reduce the cost of diabetes treatment for the NHS.

The review would look at the impact of the Bill on the pricing and availability of medicines and other medical supplies. We would gently point out to the Minister that two years ago, when the previous voluntary agreement was introduced, the Government said that it would “provide an unprecedented level of certainty on almost all the NHS branded medicines bill.”

Evidently that has not come to pass. The review would enable us to identify any issues at an early stage and take the appropriate action. I know that the Government were not willing to commit to such a review in Committee. The Minister referred us to a clause in the draft regulations, referring to a review one year on from the introduction of the regulations. However, that is simply not the same thing as looking at the impact of the legislation in its totality. The way the regulations are currently drafted means that there is more than a little of the Minister being able to mark his own homework, so to speak. The draft regulations talk about the review in a much narrower sense: enabling the Minister to set out the objectives intended to be achieved by the regulations in the report itself rather than at this point, and only specifically mentioning whether those objectives could be achieved with less regulation.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend find it strange that the regulations that might be made pursuant to the Act—the Government have helpfully given us a draft—talk about a review being carried out? Paragraph 14(2) states that the report must in particular “set out the objectives intended to be achieved by these Regulations”.

Would one not expect those objectives to be set out before the regulations were made? Are the Government not putting the cart before the horse?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why there is anxiety that we may end up with a self-fulfilling prophecy with these reviews. No doubt the Minister can address that when he replies.

There is nothing to assess the potential impact of the Bill and the regulations on research and development investment, nothing on the potential impact on innovation, and nothing on the availability of medicines and other medical supplies. We believe our anxieties in these areas are well founded, so I hope the Minister will reconsider his stance on this proposal, or at least provide us with some reassurance that these areas of concern will be carefully monitored.

Amendment 8 would to compel the Government to reinvest the rebate from the pharmaceutical sector for the purpose of improving access to new and innovative medicines and treatments. On Second Reading, the Secretary of State confirmed that £1.24 billion had so far been returned to the Department of Health through and it is anticipated that the sum to be received annually will increase when the Bill is enacted.
Although numerous questions have been asked throughout the passage of the Bill, we have still not been able to pin down the Government on exactly where this money has gone, other than into the general pot. It is our fear that this new money, which could have delivered a step-change in access to treatments to the benefit of patients and the life sciences sector, will instead be simply added to the baseline, with every £1 from the pharmaceutical sector meaning £1 less coming from the Treasury. Given the often heated exchanges across the Dispatch Box about the true sums being put into the NHS, it would aid transparency if it were made clear that this money was being put in over and above Government funding and was ring-fenced for a specific use. In Scotland, rebates are already ring-fenced and reinvested to provide new treatments and medicines. Nothing that the Minister has said has dissuaded us from believing that that is the correct approach.

According to James Barrow from the Cystic Fibrosis Trust, using the rebate in this way provides both the access and transparency that are lacking in the rest of the UK. He cites the example of the medicine Kalydeco, which increases the lung capacity of people with cystic fibrosis by up to 10%. It has meant that some patients who were previously housebound are now able to run up to 5 km. Patients in England are unable to access this drug, whereas patients across comparable nations in Europe and in Scotland can benefit from its transformative effect. He points out:

“There is no comparable fund in England. Having the new medicines fund in Scotland provides a much greater chance for patients to be able to access these medicines. We just don’t see a clear pathway in England for how patients can access these medicines.”

There are many other similar examples.

The NHS is our proudest national achievement, but it is to our shame that people in England are deprived of vital drugs and treatments on the basis of financial, rather than clinical, judgments. In Committee, the Minister suggested that the fluctuations in income could have adverse consequences, but we understood the purpose of the Bill was to deliver certainty. In any event, ring-fencing does not preclude additional resourcing if required. For all those reasons, I hope the Government will give serious consideration to this proposal.

Turning finally to the remaining amendments, we welcome the further improvements tabled by the Secretary of State in relation to the devolved Administrations. However, questions perhaps have to be asked about the consultation process if such changes are being introduced by the Government at such a late stage. Perhaps this will be reflected on when it comes to future legislation.

We welcome the amendments to clauses 5 and 6 tabled by the Scottish National Party. In particular, we welcome the call for a consultation on the potential impact of controls on other medical supplies. Those provisions were notably lacking from the initial consultation, so there is still considerable anxiety within the sector about how the controls will be used. I understand that this is a matter for future regulations, but it is less than satisfactory for the Government to ask us for powers before telling us how they will be used. We would say this is another reason for us to seriously consider setting out now the kind of review envisaged by new clause 1.

Keith Vaz: I will not detain the House for long. I know that that normally means the start of a very long speech, but I will be very brief. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party group on diabetes and as a type 2 diabetic.

I welcome the proposals put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) from the Labour Front Bench. I hope the Government accept them. They are reasonable proposals that are designed to look at the impact of the Act and ensure it achieves what it hopes to achieve. That is not always the case with legislation.

There is a lot of agreement on the Bill, and the Minister should be commended for how he has introduced it. The reason for the Bill is the ever-rising cost of drugs to the national health service. We know of the work done by The Times in particular. It is always a battle for diabetics, especially when we meet in informal circumstances, as happened last week when the new report of the all-party group was launched by the Secretary of State for Health. I think the Minister was due to come—I may have gone before he arrived. [Interruption.] He is nodding. [Interruption.] No, he didn’t come. I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know you do not like Members nodding.

Our concern is the ever-increasing cost of diabetes drugs to the NHS. As the House knows, diabetes complications cost the NHS 10% of its budget—a huge amount of money—while the drugs bill is about £900 million. The problem is the desire of local GPs to prescribe drugs instead of looking for alternatives. That is why I support the duty to promote innovation in subsection (1)(c) of the new clause. This is extremely important as far as diabetes is concerned. Exactly one week ago, at the invitation of the Steno centre in Denmark and the Leicester diabetes centre, one of the foremost diabetes centres in the country—I pay tribute to Professors Heather Daly, Kamlesh Khunti and Melanie Davies—I spoke at a conference in Copenhagen on innovation. The NHS innovating, as proposed in subsection (1)(c), will result in a reduction in the overall cost of the drugs budget.

When I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, the first thing my GP did was put me on metformin. My mother had diabetes before me. There is usually a family history—not always and not in respect of type 1 diabetes, but certainly in respect of families from the south Asian community, though of course diabetes affects all communities. My mother had it, but I was not aware of what it meant, because at the time I was Minister for Europe and flying around better integrating Britain into the EU—unlike 15 years later when all that has changed—and I never had the opportunity to sit down with my mother, who subsequently died, and find out more about what diabetes meant. Unfortunately, most families fail to do that. As a result, my diabetes was caught very late, exactly 10 years ago.

Had I been told by my doctor, “I’m not putting you on tablets. You’re not going on metformin. I’m going to send you off to the gym. I’m going to prescribe gym for an hour, and you’re going to walk for an hour, and you’re going to make these kinds of lifestyle changes,”
I might not have stopped the type 2 diabetes affecting me, but perhaps I could have delayed its onset, and in the long run I would have saved the taxpayer a huge amount of money. That is why innovation is so vital to what is being proposed. Innovation permits so much to be done to reduce the cost to the taxpayer. I know that that is not all the Government aim to do in the Bill, but it is a big chunk of it. If we can reduce the huge amount of taxpayers’ money spent on drugs and given to pharmaceutical companies, in the long term it will help the taxpayer.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we have to educate people and make them aware of what can happen, particularly given the rising obesity levels?

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We both serve on the Administration Committee, and whenever banqueting is raised, we all highlight the need to make sure that the food MPs get, especially in the Tea Room, is compatible with decreasing obesity and calorie levels. You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, when you have your cup of tea, that on offer are Club biscuits and Victoria sponges and all these other things. I am not saying that all this comes within subsection (1)c or that it could be regarded as a question of innovation; I am simply saying that innovation is not just about new technology.

None the less, there is incredible new technology around as far as diabetes is concerned, as I saw for myself last week. People no longer need to do the finger prick test. The HbA1C test can be bought at the local chemist. It costs slightly more than a finger prick test, which is obviously free for diabetics, but it allows us to test our diabetes without having to fast, and it gives a three-month reading. Moreover, there are now machines that clamp to the side of one’s arm and which, when a mobile phone is put to them, will give a glucose reading. These incredible innovations show why the new clause is worth accepting. It has been carefully thought out by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston, who is doing an amazingly important job on the Front Bench on these matters.

The new clause would benefit the taxpayer. Innovation is very important as far as an illness such as diabetes is concerned, but, as I said, the solution is not just about the technological revolution; it is also about lifestyle changes. I notice that the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Philippa Whitford), is here. Scotland is highly advanced in terms of diabetes monitoring. One can get diabetes statistics centrally in Scotland, whereas here we cannot get them even if we write to our local clinical commissioning groups. That is why new legislation of this kind, designed to bring down the cost of drugs to the taxpayer, is very important, and why I support subsection (1)c and the review.

Finally, in respect of research and development, as mentioned in subsection (1)b of the new clause, pharmaceutical companies make an enormous amount of money—they are some of the biggest companies in the world—and we need to encourage them to plough back a good proportion of their profits into research and development. The Steno centre in Denmark only exists because of money from Novo Nordisk, one of the biggest diabetes drugs companies in the world. A person can go to the Steno centre, and in the first room they can have their blood taken by a diabetes nurse; in the next room, they can have their feet looked at by a podiatrist who is an expert in diabetes; in the next room, they can have their eyes tested—those of us with diabetes have eye problems; in the next, they can have their consultation with a GP; and if necessary, they can see a consultant. That is what I meant when I talked about the diabetes village. It comes from the concept of the Steno centre. At the moment, as a diabetic I have to go to different centres and hospitals to see my GP and others. In one case, I had to carry my own blood—

Rob Marris: I carry mine all the time.

Keith Vaz: In a little test tube! I carried my own blood to the laboratory, because it was the quickest way I could get a reading. Incidentally, from the look of him, my hon. Friend carries his blood very well. We want this innovation and research and development. The drugs companies should be able to plough back profits within the industry, and in the long run this innovation will make a great deal of difference.

When I went to New York for a meeting on Yemen, I stopped in at the diabetes centre of the Mount Sinai Hospital, and was told about the incredible innovation in diabetes in the US. I also went to see Mayor Bill de Blasio’s diabetes team. As Members will know, New York cut the level of sugar in soft drinks, as we are doing now, but the centre of its diabetes initiative is the lifestyle coach, not the GP.

As we look at these provisions, we see every opportunity for a cogent and coherent review that will particularly help—this is my main argument today—those with diabetes, but also others with similar problems connected with their illnesses. I urge the Minister, who I know has been extremely reasonable on this Bill, to look seriously at the new clause. If he cannot accept new clause 1 itself, will he at the very least give an undertaking from the Dispatch Box that the points embodied in it will be reported back to Parliament in a few months’ time?

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Like the shadow Health Minister, we will not obstruct the Bill, because we support the basic aim to control prices in order to achieve a good return to the NHS from the drugs that it uses.

We also support in principle new clause 1. Six months might be a little early technically to bring things together, and there should not be just a single report because we will only see change over time. To look at the success of these actions, we need to see a price being controlled, and to spot when prices are sliding out of control. I would therefore suggest looking at the data and information on an annual basis and perhaps laying it before Parliament to show that the Bill’s aim is being achieved and that the concerns of the official Opposition are being allayed.

We support amendment 8 because it advocates the same approach that we have in Scotland. While the Cancer Drugs Fund in England is welcome and has clearly helped many patients, it is limited in the sense that if people do not have cancer they cannot access the medicines fund. That means that people with rare diseases are left somewhat abandoned. Frankly, if it were left solely to NHS England, those people would be left in
the desert. It is important that significant money will be released, and the provision could gain support from the pharmaceutical industry if it sees that the money it is returning is enabling innovative medicines to come to the NHS earlier. Sometimes when we compare certain illnesses such as cancer, we find that the gap is in relation to people with more advanced diseases struggling to access the newest medicines. If the amendment helps to address that, we would support it.

The Scottish Medicines Consortium was reformed in 2014, and Scotland has now moved up from passing 53% of all applications to 77%, with a further review going ahead at the moment to see how to improve this further. The aim is not to avoid using drugs; the aim is to access them at a decent price. If the pharmaceutical industry is returning money to the NHS, it should enable earlier access.

Amendment 9 was tabled by SNP Members and we put it before the Public Bill Committee. It deals with clause 5, which extends a power that in fact already existed but was never used—to control the price of medical services and medical supplies as well as drugs. I am quite disappointed that we did not manage to get this amendment adopted, so I raise again the issue of quality control and ask the Government to consult on it.

I know I spoke extensively in Committee about surgical gloves, but they provide a good example in that the range of quality is vast, and if poor quality gloves are used, there is likely to be extra cost to the NHS either when gloves have to be changed two or three times within one operation or more subtly if a surgeon is exposed to blood at the end of an operation from a tiny pinhole that was not visible. The same point applies to gowns and drapes. Taking off a gown that is meant to be protective and discovering that you are soaked to the skin in blood is a pretty unpleasant experience, and it obviously increases the risk to staff. The idea that skin in blood is a pretty unpleasant experience, and it

2.45 pm

In Scotland, we have the national procurement and logistics system, which takes right to the ward level a sort of Amazon-style system whereby the ward will order the medical supplies it needs, and they will be picked from 9,000 items held by national procurement and delivered by national logistics all the way to the ward. The supply chain, as it is called in England, has 600,000 items, which suggests that Professor Carter’s proposal to limit what is used and to look more at governance of the supply chain list would be rigorously tested by staff, with feedback, and it would be for a national procurement group to decide whether to stock it.

Finally, our amendment 10 is designed to focus on the sharing of information that is going to be collected by the Secretary of State, ensuring that any such data that relates to the devolved Administrations—essentially, their data—is freely accessible to them. The Minister mentioned the memorandum of understanding, and I would like to hear where we are with that and whether it will mean real-time access to a database that would be given to authorities listed here or whether they would have to put in a request. It is vital to provide data to the devolved Administrations when they request it, and not on some fixed annual date chosen by the Secretary of State. If those Administrations perceive that there is an emerging problem, they can then deal with it. Having been involved in clinical data collection, I know that there is nothing more frustrating for a team than to be doing the work to gather data, but having no option to access the data when it needs to interrogate them. I simply ask the Minister again to clarify where we are with the memorandum of understanding. I would welcome his commitment to this as we go forward.

Rob Marris: As hon. Members know, overall I welcome the Bill, which is broadly a socialist Bill. It reinforces price controls and profit controls on big pharma, when appropriate. I always like to encourage the Conservative party, sadly now in government, to come a little further down the socialist road. They claim to be the workers’ party, and that is good.

New clause 1, tabled and moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), is central to what we should be talking about in many spheres of public life—namely, evidence-based policy. All too often in this House—this applies to Governments of both colours—policy appears to be made on a political whim.

I remember in, I think, 2008 the then Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Blackburn, Jack Straw, writing certainly to Labour MPs asking what we wanted in the Queen’s Speech that year. [Interruption.] We were in government, but perhaps he should have written to the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns). I replied, because I believe in evidence-based policy, that in that year’s Queen Speech I wanted not a single piece of legislation. I said that after 10 years of a Labour Government, I wanted Parliament to spend a year on scrutiny, looking at the legislation that we had introduced over that period to see what had worked and what had not worked.

To my astonishment, the Leader of the House did not accept that proposal, as those who were Members then will recall, and we had another full legislative programme. Let me add, as an aside—if you will grant me a small bit of latitude, Madam Deputy Speaker—that by the end of the Labour Government I had stopped voting on crime Bills because we had had so many. Some of them—this may have happened under the previous Conservative Government—repealed parts of earlier crime Bills introduced by a Labour Government which had never been brought into force. That was extraordinary.

I urge the Minister to recognise that evidence-based policy making is encouraged by new clause 1. I hope that, in the context of innovation, which was so eloquently addressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for
Leicester East (Keith Vaz), he will say a little about the way in which the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence operates.

As the Minister may know, there is an issue involving cystic fibrosis and the drug Orkambi, which NICE turned down owing to a lack of sufficient data. I understand that, because it is NICE’s job to weigh the evidence, such as it may be. The drug is registered for use in this country, but it is not available on the NHS. Since NICE decided that the cost-benefit analysis did not stack up, some long-term data from the United States, which I understand to be robust, has been made available. I gather, although I may be wrong, that NICE has not yet reviewed its decision on Orkambi, although the evidence from the United States suggests that in certain cases it can be extremely effective in treating cystic fibrosis. I hope that when we are discussing processes, innovation, efficiency and policy-based decision making, the Minister will say a little, not necessarily about Orkambi itself, but about the process whereby NICE might, in the light of new evidence, promptly— I stress the word “promptly”— review its decisions.

Dr Philippa Whitford: There is an additional issue. Drugs or treatments are being passed by NICE but not actually introduced. Either they are rationed and limited to a certain number of patients a month, as is the case with hepatitis C drugs, or the decisions are being left to clinical commissioning groups, which means that we are enshrining postcode prescribing instead of getting rid of it.

Rob Marris: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady, who, as ever, speaks with authority on these issues. I am a bit of a centraliser, because I do not like postcode lotteries. We will already have that in a cross-border sense—between England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—but it is a great deal worse when just some CCGs in England are making a drug available when it has been signed off by NICE as safe for use but it is not mandatorily available, and not every patient for whom it is medically appropriate can obtain it from every CCG. That sort of postcode lottery undermines the “national” part of the national health service, which is regrettable.

Amendment 8, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), would ring-fence savings made through the provisions of this Bill and earlier legislation so that the money thereby saved, or paid into the pot by a pharmaceutical company, can be retained for expenditure on medicines and medical supplies. I hope the Government will support that. All too often we hear that Governments do not like ring-fencing, and I understand why: it fetters their discretion. Earlier this afternoon, however, I asked the Secretary of State for Justice whether the education budgets devolved to prison governors would be ring-fenced, because I feared that a prison governor who was under other budgetary pressures might not spend the money on education and prison education would not improve as it needs to. I was greeted with a very welcome one-word answer, which was “Yes.” I hope that, in a slightly different context, the Minister can give the same assurance this afternoon, because this is an excellent amendment which clarifies a slight gap in the Bill.

As for amendment 9, about which the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) spoke so eloquently, efficiency is of course important, but so is quality. I do not know whether the old saying “Penny wise and pound foolish” is used in Scotland—she is nodding—but it certainly is in my part of the west midlands. We have seen that time and time again with privatisations. When services are privatised they go to the lowest bidder, and what do we find? Either the service is not up to scratch, or, all too often—I think this happened when Circle ran Hinchinbrooke hospital—the companies go bust because they find that it is not as easy as they thought it would be to make a profit out of, in this case, the health service. That may happen to other suppliers as well. Quality matters, and the national health service is not a commercial organisation.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): I am listening carefully to what the hon. Lady is saying about Hinchinbrooke hospital. Might I suggest, tactfully, that he go and look at that hospital? Patients in Huntingdon would say that the hospital had vastly improved, but because of the conditions, it was not possible to make a financial success of it. The company did not go bust; it decided to withdraw. However, in the view of the patients who used it, the quality of the care provided by what had been a failing hospital had vastly improved. Moreover, the trade unions agreed to the deal that was done to put Circle there.

Rob Marris: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making my point for me. This is about quality; it is not just about price. That company got its price wrong. It said that it could provide a quality for a certain price, and it did provide the quality but not for that price, and it jacked the contract in.

Sir Simon Burns: I think that what the hon. Gentleman said at the beginning of his comments on Hinchinbrooke —we will know for certain when we see the Official Report tomorrow—showed that he was using that example inaccurately to make a point about privatisation. He said that privatisation caused quality to go down, but that in this case the company had gone bust. He was wrong on both counts.

Rob Marris: The right hon. Gentleman may well be correct on that specific point, and I fully accept that. There is in privatisations, however, a nexus between quality and price, and very often—although not always—the companies that promise a quality at a certain price are unable to deliver it. They cannot deliver the quality of service, and/or they cannot do so at the price at which they promised to do so. He can correct me on this if he wishes, but we see that time and again when rail franchises come back to the Government and say, “We promised a certain level of service for a certain price. We cannot do it: we need a bigger bung.”

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I think that the hon. Gentleman may have stumbled into a quagmire in referring to Hinchinbrooke. The Public Accounts Committee, of which, as he may know, I was a member for four and a half years, found that pricing was not the significant issue that led to the end of the franchise of the private provider Circle. The significant issues involved the wider healthcare economy, and the failure of the strategic health authority to discharge its duties in respect of clinical business for the hospital.
Rob Marris: The hon. Gentleman has considerably more knowledge than I have. I have talked about evidence-based policy making, and I am entirely prepared to accept the evidence that he presents. However, the company could not make a go of it, although I accept that that may not have been the company’s fault.

Amendments 1 to 5 come as a package. Amendment 3, which is a substantive amendment, refers to a “person who provides primary medical services”.

I hope that the Minister can talk us through that, in the light of a trend that is starting in some parts of England and is most advanced—if I may make a value judgment—in Salford, where the GPs who provide primary services are directly employed by the hospital trust. So the hospital trust is no longer just secondary or even tertiary; it is primary. I just wanted to unpick the wording to make sure that that development of service delivery in England has been taken into account and that the amendments do not assume that the existing silos between primary and secondary continue, because that development has now arisen in Wolverhampton, which I represent. There are three GP practices in Wolverhampton that are piloting their staff being employed by the excellent Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust. I say it is excellent because it is one of the 15% of hospital trusts in England that does not have a deficit, and I think part of that is related to the fact that it has only £15 million of private finance initiative. But that is another debate that I will not get into now.

3 pm

The Scottish National party’s amendments 9 and 10 reprise amendments proposed in the Bill Committee, on which I had the pleasure to serve, and I hope that the Minister can give us an explanation, particularly in relation to amendment 9. I had understood him, perhaps wrongly, to say in Committee that he liked what the SNP was putting forward in terms of quality, but he did not think the wording was quite right, so he hoped to be able to come back on Report with an amendment relating to quality. I may have misunderstood or misremembered what he said, but if my memory is correct, I hope that he can explain why I cannot see on the amendment paper a Government amendment relating to quality. Perhaps he proposes to table an amendment at a later stage.

I am bemused by amendment 7, which is about the definition of medical supplies, but no doubt the Minister will, in his usual way, be able to elucidate later. I hoped in Committee to be able to persuade the Government to clarify the definition of medical supplies in section 260 of the National Health Service Act 2006. It is my understanding that that definition relates only to England. Amendment 7 relates only to Wales, but the two seem to me to be on all fours.

Section 260(5) of the 2006 Act states:

“medical supplies” includes surgical, dental and optical materials and equipment

When I look at the part of this Bill that relates to Wales, I see that clause 7 would insert proposed new section 201A into the National Health Service (Wales) Act 2006. It says:

“‘medical supplies’ includes surgical, dental and optical materials and equipment”.

That is the same wording, this time applying to Wales, as in section 260(5) of the NHS Act 2006, which applies to England. Amendment 7 amends the Welsh legislation, very understandably, to clarify the definition of medical supplies. In Committee the Government did not see the need to clarify the definition of medical supplies as it applies to England, but today are seeking to clarify the same definition of medical supplies as it applies to Wales. I am therefore bemused.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend’s analysis of medical supplies is very interesting. I would have thought that pharmaceuticals, for example, would be classified as medical supplies, given that they have always been a contentious area of negotiations over costs. I am surprised that they are not included in the definition.

Rob Marris: Medical supplies in this part of the Bill seem to be to do with physical equipment. But, again, what is equipment? We can refer to the definitions, which state:

“medical supplies’ includes surgical, dental and optical materials and equipment”.

Drugs are dealt with elsewhere in the legislation.

I think the Minister has got the point, but I will repeat it very briefly. He is seeking clarification for the Wales legislation through amendment 7 when I understood him to say that he did not think such clarification was needed for the same definition contained in the legislation pertaining to England. I would like him to explain that apparent anomaly. If it is not an anomaly, perhaps he could tell the House that he is going to clarify the definition as it relates to England in the later stages of this Bill.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I rise to speak to the new clause, the Government amendments and all other amendments tabled on Report. I want to start by expressing my gratitude to the Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen, who both confirmed their intent to continue in the spirit of constructive dialogue we have had thus far in our consideration of the Bill. I am pleased that they support the Bill’s objectives, and I will seek to respond to their amendments.

Hon. Members will recall that we debated at length in Committee the issue raised in new clause 1. I want to take this opportunity to provide some additional reassurance that this is an important issue for the Government. We have already included in the illustrative regulations for both the statutory scheme, in regulation 32, and the information regulations, in regulation 14, an annual review of the regulations and a requirement to publish our report of each review. These annual reviews go further than the specific single review proposed by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) in new clause 1, the effect of which would require the Government to only undertake a single review within six months of the Act coming into force.

We accept that reporting is an important principle. However, setting out the requirements in primary legislation is too restrictive. We believe that the proposed single review within the first six months of the Act coming into force would provide an insufficient timeframe in which to assess the impact of the provisions, whereas the annual reviews we have set out in the illustrative regulations in effect place a duty on the Government to review both the statutory scheme and the information
regulations to ensure their effectiveness, and to do so every year. Of course these provisions will be subject to consultation as part of the wider consultation on the regulations.

Over time we expect that both the statutory scheme and the information requirements will be amended through their respective regulations to reflect changing circumstances. It is essential that the review and reporting arrangements are able to be similarly flexible so that they remain appropriate to the schemes in operation.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston asked whether objectives should be set out before the regulations come into force. As I have said, the Government will consult on regulations before they come into force. The objectives of the regulations will be explored in the consultation and set out in the Government response to that consultation. I hope that addresses his point.

The illustrative regulations require an annual review to set out the objectives of the scheme, assess the extent to which they have been achieved, and assess whether they remain appropriate. These requirements will be tested through the consultation on the regulations, and we will of course take account of those views.

Rob Marris: First, I say again that I am very grateful to the Government for publishing the illustrative draft regulations to help us debate the Bill. Let us consider the provision of information in connection with the draft health service products regulations 2017. Regulation 14(2)(a) states that the report must in particular “set out the objectives intended to be achieved by these Regulations”, and then regulation 14(2)(b) says it must “assess the extent to which these objectives are achieved.”

It seems a bit odd to say that in one review we are going to set out the objective and then decide whether the objective has been achieved or not. That seems, temporally, to be a bit wrong.

Mr Dunne: As I have indicated, we intend to undertake these reviews every year. It will probably be impossible to assess in the first review whether the objectives have been achieved—there might be some ability to assess it—but in subsequent iterations we will be able to look back and see how well they have been achieved.

I notice that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) is heading for the exit—at least for now. He has now resumed his seat. This is not specifically the right point in my speech to pick up on the points he has raised, but I would like to respond to his characteristically constructive contribution on the subject of diabetes. He is the chair of the all-party group on diabetes, and he might recall that I used to be the vice-chair of that group, as I have family members with type 1 and type 2 diabetes. I have considerable sympathy with the points that he made about the importance of adequate advice for individuals who might be unaware that they have diabetes. He also talked about the importance of adopting innovation through NHS treatment of the condition. We share that objective, and nothing in the Bill will do anything other than to continue to encourage innovation. I will be making further remarks, perhaps when the right hon. Gentleman is not with us, on the subject of innovation, but I just wanted him to be aware that I had taken his points on board. He might be disappointed by my conclusion on the specific amendment, but I shall go on to explain how his point is being addressed in other ways.

Returning to new clause 1 and the question of regulations, I wish to make a further point. Much of the information provided to the Secretary of State will be commercially confidential. We touched on this in Committee. I am sure that suppliers have every confidence that the Government will maintain that confidentiality in anything we publish, but it is important to reinforce the principle. This means that there is a limit to the level of detail we are able to publish, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston will appreciate the commercial sensitivity reasons involved. Any information we do publish will be at a consolidated level, protecting suppliers’ confidentiality but allowing the Secretary of State to be clear on the basis of the conclusions of his review. We will of course be able to use supporting information to evidence our conclusions.

Turning to the detail of the new clause, its requirements reflect the duties placed on the Secretary of State in the Bill, but I must be clear that the content of such a report should not be restricted and must be able to address the key issues arising during the year that may affect the operation of the schemes. The other significant element of the new clause, which I have touched on in response to the right hon. Member for Leicester East, was discussed at length in Committee. This was the question of whether it would be appropriate for such a report to address matters relating to the NHS duty to promote innovation.

The Government’s position is clear that it is not appropriate to link the measures in the Bill, which relate purely to the cost of medicines and medical supplies, to the NHS duty to promote innovation. Promoting innovation is a high priority not only for the Government and the NHS but for many other stakeholders. Promotion of innovation quite properly requires action across many different fronts, and it would not be possible to quantify the contribution of the schemes in the Bill to that endeavour in any meaningful way. The NHS is already doing great work to promote innovation, and I would like to draw hon. Members’ attention to the latest data from the innovation scorecard, a quarterly data publication showing the uptake of innovative drugs and medical technologies following NICE approval in England. This is now a nationally published statistic.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) asked specifically about this in his remarks. I can tell him that the latest publication, on 12 October this year, shows that the rate of uptake for 85 medicines recommended by NICE is increasing, that 77% of those medicines had positive growth uptake between March 2015 and March 2016, and that 54% of the 85 medicines had a growth uptake greater than 10%. These data are made available on a quarterly basis, and hon. Members can follow their progress through the official national statistics.

The Government are taking broader action to secure the UK’s future as an attractive place for the life sciences sector, particularly in the light of the EU referendum and the consequent Brexit. We are clear in our commitment to the life sciences, and to building a long-term partnership with industry. The hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West also asked me to address the question of the NICE process and whether this takes evidence into
account. He also asked about the process for the subsequent review of previous decisions. This is a continuous process. It does not happen for every drug all the time, but there is a routine procedure under which, on the basis of new evidence, NICE will look again at a decision and decide whether to uphold or amend it. That procedure could allow drugs that had previously not been approved to become approved on the basis of new evidence, and NICE will look at evidence from wherever it comes. I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman.

3.15 pm

I should also like to draw Members’ attention to the accelerated access review, which made recommendations on the reforms to accelerate access to innovative medicines and medical technologies for NHS patients. The Government and our partners are considering those recommendations, and we will respond in due course. We want to make the UK the best place in the world to design, develop and deploy life science products. We do not believe that the Bill will have any material impact on that effort, other than the minor impact noted in the impact assessment. That belief is backed by independent evidence, which suggests that there is no obvious reason why NHS pricing policy for pharmaceuticals, or the time taken to make decisions on reimbursement, should significantly affect decisions to invest in research and development in pharmaceuticals in the United Kingdom. Instead, the evidence suggests that the most important attraction for companies to invest in research in the UK is the availability of world-class scientific expertise, and this is the focus of the Government’s effort to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of global research and development.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston asks for our reports to be laid before Parliament. We will be publishing them on an annual basis, and I am happy to commit to laying the first one before Parliament. When we see how much interest it attracts, we will be able to decide whether to do that again in subsequent years or simply to publish the reports in the normal way. On that basis, I hope that he will withdraw his new clause.

Amendment 8 aims to require the income from the voluntary scheme and the statutory scheme to be ring-fenced to reimburse the NHS for expenditure on medicines and medical supplies, in order to increase access to new and innovative medicines and treatments. We are committed to ensuring that patients have faster access to new and innovative medicines and treatments. We know that investing in new, innovative medicines and treatments, where they are proven to work and are a clinical priority, and has the potential to transform the care of patients and improve outcomes. However, it is a fundamental principle of the NHS that funding should be allocated according to clinical priorities, based on the judgment of clinical commissioners. That might include new treatments, but it might just as easily include the scaling up of older effective treatments or investing in more staff. We understand the intention behind the amendment, but it is for NHS England and clinical commissioning groups to determine clinical priorities and spend the money on what is clinically most important.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) has supported this amendment, and while it is not for me to comment on the policies of the Scottish Government, we know that the NHS in Scotland has raised concerns that the new medicines fund, to which she referred, only funds medicines at the end of life or for rare diseases, meaning that funding for other areas is not getting the same priority.

Dr Philippa Whitford indicated dissent.

Mr Dunne: The hon. Lady is shaking her head. That is my information, but if that is not the case, perhaps she would like to enlighten me further.

Dr Whitford: It is a new medicines and rare diseases fund, and it includes orphan, ultra-orphan and end of life, but it is not only about end of life.

Mr Dunne: No, it is not only for end of life, but also for rare diseases. That was my understanding, but I stand corrected. However, my main point is that it should be for clinicians to decide what is spent across the range of activity. If money is ring-fenced into a specific fund for new medicines, that might not always be the right clinical decision.

Dr Whitford: Does the Minister accept that it is a slightly bizarre public relations thing to have a medicines fund that is only for cancer, ruling out people with other life-threatening illnesses? That is the case here in England.

Mr Dunne: The new cancer drugs fund was set up specifically to provide funds to deal with one of the most common causes of mortality in the country, and was a priority of the previous Government, I will not go into the reasons for that.

Returning to amendment 8, it was suggested that what happens to the receipts is not clear, but all income generated by the voluntary and statutory schemes is reinvested in the NHS. Estimates of income from the pharmaceutical payment regulation scheme are part of the baseline used in the Department’s spending review model. The model was used to calculate the funding increase that the NHS sought at the time of the 2015 spending review, and it helped to secure the £10 billion of real-terms funding over the course of this Parliament. The income from the voluntary and statutory schemes can and does fluctuate; that is the biggest problem with ring-fencing, which could bring risks in this area. For example, the annual income from the PPRS has varied between £310 million and £839 million in a full financial year in England, so there is the potential for the income that it generates to vary widely, which could disadvantage patients by making treatment dependent on income from a pricing scheme with unsteady income generation.

Rob Marris: I understand where the Minister is going with that, but I want to caution him. He spoke earlier about flexibility—my word, not his—and his example was that a clinical commissioning group or a medical body might want to spend some of this money on staffing. Owing to the fluctuation to which he refers, however, spending funds on staffing is probably not a good idea.
Mr Dunne: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his advice, but I am afraid that I do not think it is relevant to my point about the fluctuation in income coming from the scheme. It is relevant in relation to whether NICE or politicians make such decisions. They need to be made by clinicians.

Dr Philippa Whitford rose—

Mr Dunne: I will give way, but then I will make some progress.

Dr Whitford: I thank the Minister for kindly giving way. The cancer drugs fund has a budget of some £350 million, so if he is saying that the money that can be retrieved varies from £300 million to over £800 million, that would allow for the expansion of a new medicines fund.

Mr Dunne: It might if the move was always in the same direction. My concern is that the amount could decline between one year and the next; it may not always go up—certainly not up in a straight line.

Separately from the Bill, the Government are taking action to secure the UK’s future as an attractive place for the life sciences sector and to support faster patient access to medical innovations. I have already touched on the recently published accelerated access review, which sets out ways to increase the speed at which 21st-century innovations in medicines, medical technologies and digital products get to NHS patients and their families. The review’s recommendations included bringing together organisations from across the system in an accelerated access partnership, and creating a strategic commercial unit within NHS England that can work with industry to develop commercial access arrangements. We are considering those recommendations with partners and will respond in due course.

NHS England and NICE are jointly consulting on several proposed changes to NICE standard technology appraisals and highly specialised technology appraisals, including around speeding up the appraisal process. The Department of Health continues to work closely with NHS England and other stakeholders to improve uptake of new medicines. A key element of that is the innovation scorecard that I have already referenced. With those comments about our concerns about what is proposed in amendment 8, I ask the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) not to press her amendment.

Turning to amendment 9, tabled by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, the Government recognise that section 260 of the National Health Service Act 2006 does not explicitly state that the Government are obliged to consult industry. However, I am aware that the Act does explicitly state that there is an obligation on the Government to consult when it comes to controlling the cost of medicines. A similar amendment was tabled by the hon. Lady in Committee. I want to reiterate that I am happy to consider with her how we could best introduce a general requirement to consult industry in section 260. Indeed, my officials have been in discussions with her, and I am grateful for her time and constructive comments.

I note the hon. Lady’s reference to the effect of any pricing controls for medical supplies on maintaining the quality of those supplies. I assure her that the Government would take into account all relevant factors, including any concerns raised by industry about the quality of medical supplies, when making and consulting on any price controls for medical supplies. The Government would not however be in favour of putting one of those many factors in the Bill.

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency is responsible for the safety, efficacy and quality of medical supplies, and the Bill will not change that. The MHRA has assured me that any use of the price control powers in the Bill would not affect any of the quality or safety requirements that must be met before medical supplies can be placed on the market.

The hon. Lady referred to the procurement system in Scotland; I assure her that the Government are committed to improving procurement across the NHS. She will be well aware of the Carter report, which concluded that there is considerable variation in the value that trusts extract from their expenditure on goods and medical supplies. NHS Supply Chain is working hard to deliver procurement efficiencies, to meet recommendations to increase price transparency, to lower costs, and to reduce the number of products and suppliers used across the NHS to deliver economies of scale. The hon. Lady referred to 600,000 products, but it has had success in reducing the range in the catalogue down to 315,000 to help NHS organisations purchase products more efficiently. It continues to work to reduce that number. I am aware of similar work in Scotland. In England, we are using the Carter review to deliver that.

While I understand the intent behind the hon. Lady’s amendment, I am not fully convinced that, as drafted, it would have the desired effect. If she will continue to work with me and my officials, the Government would be happy to consider, while the Bill is in the other place, how we could best introduce the requirement to consult into section 260. On that basis, I invite her not to press her amendment for now.

Rob Marris rose—

Mr Dunne: I am afraid that I must press on to cover the Government amendments.

Government amendments 1 to 5 address a possible loophole in the Bill. Clause 6 amends the National Health Service Act 2006 to give the Secretary of State the power to make regulations to obtain information from any UK producer that is not an excepted person. A “UK producer” is defined in the Bill as anyone involved in the manufacture, distribution or supply of health service medicines, medical supplies and other related products required for the purposes of the health services in the United Kingdom. An “excepted person” is defined in the Bill as any person providing pharmacy or GP services for the health services in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The purpose of these provisions was to reflect the agreement with the devolved Administrations that, for devolved purposes, they would collect information from pharmacies and GP practices in their nation. However, there may be circumstances in which a company supplies products in the devolved Administrations and also in England, and could claim that the provision, as drafted, would allow it to become an excepted person, because it was operating in the devolved Administrations. That is clearly not the intent of the Bill, so we have proposed these amendments to address this loophole.
Government amendment 6 is a minor consequential amendment that was unintentionally omitted when the Government tabled amendments in Committee. The amendment relates to clause 6, which provides the Secretary of State with the power to disclose information to the list of bodies set out in proposed new section 264B. The amendment clarifies that the list of people to whom the Secretary of State can disclose information includes those persons providing services to the Regional Business Services Organisation in Northern Ireland; it had previously been omitted. I hope that hon. Members will accept these amendments.

I have a couple of remarks about amendment 10, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire. New section 264B in clause 6 enables the Secretary of State to disclose the information that is collected to a range of bodies, including NHS England, special health authorities, NHS Digital, other Government Departments and the devolved Administrations. The Government have concerns about this amendment, as we are dealing with confidential and commercially sensitive information that can be used only for specific purposes. We are therefore reluctant to introduce a requirement to disclose information to, for example, any Government Department or NHS England. It is important that the Government can be trusted with the information that they collect, and that there are sufficient safeguards to ensure that it is treated as confidential or commercially sensitive.

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that clarification. I think this is best addressed through a memorandum of understanding, rather than committing that to the Bill at this stage. On that basis, I hope that hon. Members will accept these amendments.

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that clarification. I think this is best addressed through a memorandum of understanding, rather than committing that to the Bill at this stage. On that basis, I hope that hon. Members will accept these amendments.

Dr Whitford: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause 6

PROVISION OF INFORMATION TO SECRETARY OF STATE AND DISCLOSURE

Amendments made: 1, page 4, line 12, leave out from “products,” to end of line 13.

This amendment is linked to amendments 2 to 5. It is directly consequential on amendment 4.

Amendment 2, page 4, line 17, at end insert—

“(subject to subsection (6A)).”

This amendment is linked to amendments 1 and 3 to 5. It flags that the provision made by section 264A(2)(a) and (b) of the National Health Service Act 2006 is subject to the provision made by amendment 3.

Amendment 3, page 5, line 47, at end insert—

“(6A) Regulations under this section may not do any of the following—

(a) require any person who provides primary medical services under Part 4 of the National Health Service (Wales) Act 2006, or any person who provides pharmaceutical services under Part 7 of that Act, to record, keep or provide information relating to any Welsh health service products which are supplied by the person in providing the services in question;

(b) require any person who provides primary medical services under section 2C(1) of the 1978 Act, or any person who provides pharmaceutical care services under section 2C(1) of that Act, to record, keep or provide information relating to any Scottish health service products which are supplied by the person in providing the services in question;
Mr Dunne: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Third time.

As we have already discussed today, it has been a pleasure to take this short, albeit technical, Bill through the House with such a wide degree of consensus from all participating parties.

We have had a very constructive debate. Points have been raised by hon. Members from both sides of the House through amendments and in debate, and we have sought to take them on board. We will look to take some of them forward as the Bill moves to the other place.

I thank Opposition Members for their contributions. They include the hon. Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Burnley (Julie Cooper), who is just about in her place, and for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who leads for the Scottish National party. We have had some strong contributions from Back Benchers, including the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Morris), who served on the Committee in his usual diligent fashion, and the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). We have also had contributions from Government Members. In particular, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who was active in Committee. I also thank my Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), and the Whips on both sides of the House.

More than £15.2 billion has been spent on medicines in the most recent full year—an increase of nearly 20% since 2010-11 and of over 7% since last year. The purpose of the Bill is to close loopholes to ensure that the NHS secures as much value for money as it can from this very significant spending on pharmaceutical and medical products. We are looking to clarify and modernise provisions to control the cost of national health service medicines and to ensure that sales and purchase information can be appropriately collected and disclosed.

Briefly, the Bill puts it beyond doubt that the Secretary of State can require companies in the statutory scheme to make payments to control the cost of NHS medicines. That is expected to save the health service across the UK some £90 million a year.

Secondly, the Bill would enable the Secretary of State to require companies to reduce the price of an unbranded generic medicine, or to impose other controls on that company’s unbranded generic medicine, even if the company is in the voluntary scheme—currently the 2014 pharmaceutical price regulation scheme—for its branded medicines.

Members will recall the examples raised on Second Reading and in Committee of companies charging the NHS unreasonably high prices for unbranded generic medicines. Without competition, companies have raised prices totally unreasonably—in the most extreme case by as much as 12,000%. Companies can do that because we rely on competition to keep prices of unbranded generic medicines down. Although that generally works well, the Government need the tools to be able to address the situation in which a small number of companies are exploiting the NHS, patients and the taxpayer by raising prices when there is no competition.

Thirdly, the Bill enables the Secretary of State to make regulations to obtain information on sales and purchases of health service products from all parts of the supply chain, from manufacturer to pharmacy, for defined purposes. These purposes are reimbursement of the NHS and manufacturers, which would lead to duplication of each nation to collect its own information from wholesalers and manufacturers, which would lead to duplication of effort and unnecessarily increase costs across the system.
We have also agreed that each nation will collect information from its own pharmacies and GPs. The devolved Administrations will have full access to all the information that the Government collects. I have committed to develop a memorandum of understanding to underpin these arrangements, and my officials are working closely on that with officials in the devolved Administrations.

To ensure that the Bill makes the Government’s intentions absolutely clear, we tabled a small number of minor and technical amendments on Report to close a potential loophole that would have enabled some companies not to provide us with any information if they also provided pharmacy or GP services to the devolved health services. This is a relatively small Bill, technical in nature, which has received considerable support from across the House, for which I am extremely grateful. The Bill will help to secure better value for money for the NHS from its spending on medicines, while ensuring that the decisions made by the Government are based on more accurate and robust information.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for presiding over today’s debates. I also thank the members of the Panel of Chairs, especially my hon. Friend and neighbour, the Member for Telford—

Rob Marris: The Wrekin.

Mr Dunne: I stand corrected—my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), under whose chairmanship I served for the first time. Finally, I thank the parliamentary Clerks and counsel, Hansard and the Doorkeepers for helping us to bring the Bill to its conclusion today.

3.41 pm

Justin Madders: As the Minister said, the Bill is designed to enable the NHS to control the cost of medicines and medical supplies and to close some of the loopholes in the system that have been the subject of blatant abuses in recent years. In seeking to achieve those aims, the Government have our support. I wish to place on the record our appreciation for the amiable way the Minister dealt with our probing of the Bill. Although he has not accepted our amendments, he has explained why not in a reasonable and constructive manner. I would also like to record my appreciation of the work of the members of the Bill Committee, including my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), who ably assisted me in tabling and speaking to Opposition amendments, and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who spoke on behalf of the Scottish National party. Particular thanks go to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris), who has been engaged and informed in equal measure throughout the Bill’s passage through this House.

Expenditure on medicines accounts for a significant and growing proportion of the NHS budget, standing at £15.2 billion in England in 2015-16, which is an increase of more than 20% since 2010-11. That reflects the incredible advances that continue to be made in the development of new and innovative medicines, often by our own life sciences industry here in the UK. Although we welcome and celebrate those developments, it is clear that taxpayers and patients have not always been well served by the market. It is important that we do all we can to secure value for money for the NHS, especially in the current financial context following six years of historic underinvestment by normal standards.

When the most recent five-year pharmaceutical price regulation scheme was agreed in early 2014, the Government said it would provide unprecedented certainty, but as we know and as was reported in February by the then Life Sciences Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), estimated incomes in the UK from PPRS payments for 2016-17 were £647 million—a considerable reduction on the £800 million received in 2015, particularly at a time when the overall drugs bill has been increasing apace. Those figures and the fact that we are debating this Bill show that the original scheme has not gone entirely to plan.

There is much in the Bill to be welcomed. We certainly want an end to the playing of the system that has been going on. We hope that the Bill will finally put an end to such antics and deliver a mechanism that ensures consistency in appropriate circumstances. We support the rationale behind aligning the statutory and voluntary schemes, which will create a more level playing field between companies and offer a much better chance of delivering greater savings and value for money to the taxpayer.

We support measures to tackle the small number of cases where we have seen companies disgracefully exploiting loopholes in the regulations to hike the price of medicines, sometimes by more than 10,000%. As we know, the investigation undertaken by The Times in the summer found that the price of medicines was inflated by £262 million a year as a result of this practice. That continues to impact on patients, often those with rarer conditions.

An example is Keveyis, a drug that has been found to be extremely effective in treating some of the symptoms of muscular dystrophy. Until 2012 it was relatively inexpensive, costing around £100 a box per patient. Unfortunately, it was discontinued by its previous manufacturer. Recently Taro Pharmaceuticals obtained the rights under orphan drug status and is now manufacturing it once again. However, its forecast price in the EU is approximately £35,000 per patient per year, despite the fact that no new research and development costs have been incurred by the company. It is therefore very difficult to see what justification there can be for such a significant price increase. Because of the rise in price, the NHS in England is refusing to provide reimbursement for the drug, which means that patients lose out. It is this deliberate manipulation of the system that we want to see dealt with and we hope that this Bill will once and for all put an end to such scandalous practices.

Although we support the broad aims of the Bill, we have had a number of concerns, some of which we have touched on already, about what is perhaps missing from the Bill and about the Government’s policies more widely on access to medicines and treatments. Despite this country’s world-leading pharmaceutical sector, which we are all rightly proud of, successive studies have demonstrated how there is a relatively low take-up of new medicines by the UK compared with other high-income countries. Members across the House will no doubt
have received many pieces of correspondence from constituents concerned about the lack of availability of medicines that they or their relatives are trying to obtain. We also see clinical commissioning groups rationing medicines and treatments in ways that would previously have seemed unthinkable.

If we are to create a level playing field for drugs companies, we should be trying to do the same for patients as well. One measure that we have proposed to tackle this issue is to ring-fence future rebates from the sector and invest them in improving access to medicines and treatments. We know that £1.24 billion of new money has been returned through the rebate since it was established. Surely there can be no more logical use for this money than to tackle the gulf between the UK’s record on developing new drugs and patients’ ability to access them.

We know that the Government were not willing to back our amendments, but I urge the Minister to look again at how a similar measure has worked in Scotland. As we heard in the debate today, there seems to be some difference of opinion about that. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire spoke strongly in support of it.

We note that a number of amendments tabled by the Government during the passage of the Bill mean that the devolved Administrations are subject to the same arrangements, although it was pointed out in Committee that there appear to be no equivalent arrangements for the devolution of health in Greater Manchester. I recall that when the Minister responded to my questions on this point, he suggested that ring-fencing the appropriate amount of the rebate for Greater Manchester might lead to chaos, as its allocation from NHS England already includes an element of income from the rebate. I think the Minister underestimates his ability to resolve the issue and overestimates the difficulty that would ensue.

The annual health budget negotiated for Greater Manchester is about £6 billion, around half the Scottish budget and around a billion pounds less than the Welsh budget, so the size of the budget is not the issue. What is an issue, though, is transparency and consistency. I do not expect any late change of heart from the Minister, but we will be watching future developments in English devolution and the accompanying budgets with interest.

The other aspect about which we have concerns is how these proposals will impact upon the future of the pharmaceutical industry in the UK, in a climate where there is already considerable anxiety in the sector about the future of the European Medicines Agency as a result of Brexit. Clearly, we will be keeping a close eye on both the operation of the scheme and the general health of the sector, particularly in terms of future investment in research and development.

To conclude, we support the broad aims of this Bill and the Government’s aim of better controlling the costs of medicines. However, we should be doing more to tackle the present situation to prevent patients from missing out on innovative treatments, particularly when we compare our record to that of countries with similar wealth. We hope that the scope of the annual review envisaged in the draft regulations is sufficiently broad to enable us to judge the Bill’s effectiveness on this issue and on the others that we have raised, and we look forward to considering the Government’s response once the consultation on the draft regulations has been completed.

As the Minister said, this is a small Bill, but the sums at stake are large. We hope to see a positive outcome for the NHS as a whole. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for chairing our proceedings today. I thank the Members who served on the Bill Committee, the Chairs and all the staff and civil servants who successfully led the Bill’s passage through the House.

3.50 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford: I will open my remarks with thanks, because this is the first Bill that I have helped to take through the House, and I am therefore very grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Chairs of the Public Bill Committee and all the staff who have worked on this, particularly those in the procedural hub; as a newbie, being able to go and ask them what happens next has been immensely helpful.

Obviously, we welcome the basic premise of the Bill, particularly clauses 1 to 4, which give the Secretary of State the power to control the price of drugs and avoid the excesses we have seen recently, as was highlighted in the article in The Times, particularly by those companies that are in the voluntary scheme but also produce generics, and therefore the price of those generics is not controlled. There are also those companies that have picked up drugs that have orphan status—they are no longer produced by anyone else—and basically robbed the NHS by increasing the price by many thousand per cent. That is just unacceptable.

When we accept relatively high prices for new drugs, we often excuse that on the basis of research and development. We need to realise that not all research and development is done by big pharmaceutical companies; they often collect drugs by buying small, spin-out companies from universities. With regard to generic or repurposed off-patent drugs, the R and D is usually done by clinicians within the NHS, or by academics in university departments. Companies have admitted in the past that they do not always price drugs in relation to their R and D costs; they sometimes do so simply by what they think the market will bear. We must not always allow them the excuse that they are spending huge amounts on R and D, because that is simply not always the case.

I tabled two new clauses in Committee. Now that the Secretary of State will have this power, I hope that the two issues raised by my new clauses will be dealt with. One is the issue of specials, which are simply hand-made preparations, usually an ointment for dermatological use. I arranged for the briefing from the British Association of Dermatologists, which highlighted companies that had a Scottish price list and an English price list, to be sent to the Minister. I therefore hope that those powers will be used. In Scotland it is done by using an NHS producer who makes the drug and therefore keeps the price down, rather than simply paying a pharmaceutical company or a pharmacy company, because the pharmacy with which the patient is dealing might have a mother or sister company and they are simply taking a very high price from them.

The other issue, which was raised last November, is that of repurposed off-patent drugs. As the shadow Minister explained at the time, an off-patent drug may...
be picked up by a new company and used for its new purpose, such as simvastatin for multiple sclerosis, but with the merest tweak it could be put out as if it is a new drug, and suddenly at a price that people cannot access. That also touches on the hierarchy whereby doctors must prescribe a licensed version before an unlicensed one. If a licensed drug came on the market that was actually just a version of an off-patent drug, doctors would be under pressure to prescribe it.

I understand that work has gone ahead since last year’s Bill, but I exhort the Minister, and through him the Secretary of State, to ensure that the powers given by this Bill are used in all these circumstances to ensure that prices are controlled. Otherwise, what happens is not a matter of expenditure to the NHS on its own, but usually that CCGs will not allow these drugs to be accessed, which is what is happening in the case of specials. We now have the powers. We welcome that, but hope that they will be used.

3.54 pm

Rob Marris: I propose, Madam Deputy Speaker, not to take the remaining three hours. Earlier, when the Minister would not take an intervention, he seemed to think there was a rush on time. My reading of the Order Paper is that we have another three hours for the Bill, but I will not take that long.

I want to put the Bill in context, because this is a socialist Bill. It builds on the Labour Government’s National Health Service Act 2006, which applied to England. Looking around, Madam Deputy Speaker, I think you and I may be the only Members present who voted for the 2006 Act—that was obviously before you were in your esteemed position. In putting the current Bill in context, it is worth reviewing what it is building on.

The 2006 Act made reference to the voluntary schemes for price control that existed then. The current voluntary scheme, of course, is the 2014 pharmaceutical price regulation scheme—the PPRS. Those voluntary schemes were to do with limiting the profits of pharmaceutical companies. Now, I stress to the House that the Labour party and I are not opposed to pharmaceutical companies per se; they do fantastic research, and there are probably millions of people alive now who would not otherwise have been alive, because of the research and development done by pharmaceutical companies—many of them, happily, based, or having major operations, in the United Kingdom. The companies are very welcome here, but they have to play by the rules, and so do those that buy up off-patent drugs, horse around with them and put up their prices by hundreds and hundreds of per cent. Sometimes, it is a minority of private equity companies that are doing that, and they are not welcome here.

Pharmaceutical companies must act responsibly, and they may need statutory encouragement to do so. The 2006 Act started the process of statutory encouragement with a statutory scheme, which enabled Her Majesty’s Government, in appropriate cases, to limit prices and the profits of pharmaceutical companies—that is why I say this is a socialist scheme. Before those on the Government Benches get all aerated about this, let me say that the Labour party and I do not wish to nationalise or control the prices in every corner store in the country—not at all—but there are certain big operations where market intervention is helpful and is needed when there is market failure. It was perceived—rightly—by the Labour Government that there was some market failure, and they needed some stern measures to sort it out.

The Bill builds on that work from 10 years ago because, as adverted to by the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), some medicine supply companies—again, a minority—were, frankly, taking the mickey. They were leaving the voluntary scheme in favour of the statutory scheme because that was more advantageous to them. I understand why they would do that—they wished to maximise their profits—but they must act in a responsible way, and if they will not do so as a result of being urged to show corporate social responsibility, which some of them will not, we need statutory measures, and that is what the Bill puts in place. One of the things the Bill does is to address the issue of companies leaving the voluntary scheme to go into the statutory scheme because it is a better deal. The Bill resets the schemes, as it were, to make sure that a company is not encouraged to do that, because there is not that comparative advantage.

The Bill also makes provision for a new power to enable the Secretary of State for Health to require a company in the voluntary scheme to pay sums due under that scheme. Even though it is a voluntary scheme, the Bill will give the Secretary of State the power to pursue non-payers through the courts. I regard that as progressive legislation. For those companies that are not acting responsibly—that are taking the mickey, as I characterised it—that is a good thing. This Government have come down the socialist path to agree with such market intervention.

The Government have also come down the Labour party path in wanting to marshal information so that we can treat these companies equally and fairly, and so that they treat the society in which they operate—refracted principally through their supply of medicines to the NHS—equitably and fairly. Under the Bill, the Secretary of State will have the power to make regulations for the marshalling of information, building on the work done in the NHS Act 10 years ago.

That is important, but on the context of the Bill, I would like to tempt Health Ministers a little further down the socialist path. The Minister described it in his opening remarks as a technical Bill, which it broadly is. However, it also has an ideological or philosophical aspect, which I have tried to set it out, because it is broadly a socialist Bill. One of the things it seeks to do is to save money for the NHS and to raise money for the NHS through clawbacks on overpriced medicines or medical supplies because the NHS—this is the context of the Bill, which is not purely technical—is in serious financial difficulty. The Minister referred to the extra £10 billion of funding for the NHS over the lifetime of this Parliament, but even the Health Committee does not accept that calculation. It is a sleight of hand.

Part of that sleight of hand relates to what is being done on social care, which is leading to a growing problem of delayed discharges. Social care is not being properly funded in this country, and the precept that councils in England are allowed to charge is in effect a
mandatory charge because the Government calculate the revenue support grant and all such local government things on the assumption that councils will raise the precept. That is having an effect on the NHS because of delayed discharges.

In the context of the crisis in social care, although the extra funding it will provide for the NHS is welcome, the Bill comes nowhere near addressing the underfunding of the NHS. In the financial terms of what it will raise or save for the NHS, the Bill—in relation to what the NHS needs and, coupled to that, what councils in England need for social care—is a drop in the ocean. The Bill will encourage a certain level of efficiency in the production, purchase and procurement of medicines and medical supplies. All of us in the House would sign up to the concept of efficient procurement. We might sometimes have different definitions of what does and does not constitute efficient procurement, but procurement is central to the Bill.

Although the NHS can, like any massive organisation, almost always act more efficiently—I hope the Bill will encourage the NHS to do so—we must bear it in mind that, in international comparisons, the NHS is one of the most efficient organisations in healthcare delivery in the world. If we look at healthcare delivery in the United States of America, for example, we can see that it spends, as a proportion of GDP, as much on public health as the United Kingdom. However, because its public health system is not run efficiently, as it is all fragmented, the USA spends the same proportion of GDP again on private health—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Bill is quite specific and that this is a Third Reading debate? He is venturing into areas that are not specifically in the Bill, and he may wish to come back to what is in the Bill.

**Rob Marris:** I am grateful to you for your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I have said, I am putting the Bill in the context of the NHS and its effect in addressing the much deeper problems of the NHS. I was simply adverting to some of those deeper problems, but I take your guidance.

I repeat to Ministers that the Government have come some way, as the Bill demonstrates, down a socialist path for the delivery of healthcare, and I encourage them to come back with another Bill, building on this one, to abandon privatisations and let us have a public NHS.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.**

### Business without Debate

#### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

**REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE**

That the draft Representation of the People (Electronic Communications and Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 2 November, be approved.—(Mark Spencer.)

**Question agreed to.**

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

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS**

That the draft Childcare (Early Years Provision Free of Charge) (Extended Entitlement) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 7 November, be approved.—(Mark Spencer.)

**Question agreed to.**

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

**BANKS AND BANKING**

That the draft Bank Recovery and Resolution Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 3 November, be approved.—(Mark Spencer.)

**Question agreed to.**

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

**FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS**

That the draft Bank of England Act 1998 (Macro-prudential Measures) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 16 November, be approved.—(Mark Spencer.)

**Question agreed to.**
**Rail Services: Southend**

*Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Mark Spencer.)*

4.5 pm

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): Christmas has come early for me, with our reaching the Adjournment debate earlier than usual. However, I say to my hon. Friend the Minister, with good heart, that there is no point in having an Adjournment debate and exchanging 15 minutes of words each unless there is a positive outcome, which is what I expect. There could be no finer Christmas present for my constituents than improving the very disappointing train service that c2c and Abellio Greater Anglia offer.

There is some irony to the debate because I had an Adjournment debate on the same subject at the beginning of the year and again, the business ended rather earlier than expected. On that occasion, the Minister and I were caught out, but we certainly have not been caught out this time.

My hon. Friend the Minister was elected to the House in 2010, so he has not had the opportunity of listening to me talking about the railway service that my constituents enjoy or suffer. He is dependent on the briefing that his officials give him, and they are dependent on the briefing that the people who run the services give them. That shows how things have changed in this place.

Once upon a time—the violins come out—the democratically elected Member of Parliament raised an issue, the Minister was concerned about all he had heard and he could do something about it. He could actually make a difference. In 2016, it does not feel like that. The way in which power has increasingly seeped away from this place is disappointing. Doubtless the Minister will shock me at the end of the debate and I will leave here happy, with him guaranteeing to have a good word with the deliverers of the two rail services and saying that things will improve.

When I was Member of Parliament for Basildon—the violins come out again—I called for the privatisation of the Fenchurch Street line. I am not an MP who talks about rail services hypothetically. I am a commuter and have been for many years. I was a commuter before I became a Member of Parliament, and my wife and I remember standing on crowded platforms, our hearts in our mouths, as the train stopped, the carriage doors opened and people fell out because there was such a crush. We would think, “Oh crikey, we can’t get on the next train. We’re going to be late for work. What will our bosses think of all this?”

Our train services have improved, and I pay tribute to my predecessor, the late Lord Channon, and the late Lord Parkinson. Both those former colleagues, when they were Secretaries of State, were responsible for much of the improvement of the tube and railway services that we take for granted. However, if they were alive today, they would be very disappointed to see what has happened to the c2c line.

I do not blame the women and men who work for the two train companies. They do a wonderful job under difficult circumstances. However, I blame the management and the senior management, particularly of National Express. They tried to shut me up earlier this year because I was trying to get an improvement in the services. I absolutely blame them and will not stop raising these matters in the House of Commons until there is a dramatic improvement in services.

All those years ago, when the things we did in the House were reported, I had an argument on live TV with the then chairman of British Rail. I can remember coming back from the broadcast and being applauded by colleagues in the Division Lobby because they thought it was good that a local MP had taken the national rail service to task. Everything changed. We used to be called the misery line. The line was privatised and we became the happy line. It was completely transformed and the constituents I represented at the time were pleased with the improved services.

Since 1997, I have been the Member of Parliament for Southend West but I use the same railway line. The stations that serve the area I represent are Westcliff, Chalkwell, Leigh-on-Sea and Prittlewell, which is served by Abellio Greater Anglia. I am very pleased to see in their places my hon. Friend the Members for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) and for Fylde (Mark Menzies)—it is always good to have his support. I could go on to mention other colleagues. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) is not in his place but would also support me.

**Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): I am here in my capacity as a member of the Transport Committee. My hon. Friend has raised this matter on many occasions, and I want to share what he says in this Adjournment debate with members of the Committee and see whether we can look at it and help him.

**Sir David Amess**: I am flattered and honoured. I had forgotten that my hon. Friend is a member of the Transport Committee. My hon. Friend raised this matter on many occasions, and I was there to share what he says in this Adjournment debate with members of the Committee and see whether we can look at it and help him.

This time last year I was looking forward to Christmas. The gentleman running the line contacted me and my colleagues to say that, although there would be some changes, it was all good news, and that the wonderful service would be even better. On 13 December 2015, the timetable changed. We were told that, as a result, there would be improved passenger experiences, which is definitely not the case judging by my inbox, and increased reliability, but a constituent has said that it is “rarer to have a day without issues than a day with”.

We were promised quicker commutes and more seat availability, but another constituent has written to say that people are already standing by the time the train arrives at Westcliff. I am not criticising the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East who get on at Thorpe Bay and the other stations—they are more than entitled to do so—but by the time the trains reach Westcliff where I get on, they are already packed.

We were also told that, if the changed timetable failed, we would more than likely return to the old one, but that has obviously not happened. Within days of those initial changes in December 2015, my mailbox and inbox were piling up with complaints, so I did not have as happy a Christmas as I had anticipated.
Constituents showed the extent of their upset by protesting at a famous, or infamous, rally. People do not often have rallies on platforms, but we had one on the platform at Fenchurch Street station on 14 January 2016.

In April 2016, following the public rally in the railway station, the wonderful Essex radio broadcaster Dave Monk interviewed Mr Drury, the gentleman responsible for running the line. Mr Drury said that he was “Going to reduce the number of trains and use those carriages to lengthen the other trains, so we’ve got longer trains.”

The logic of how that would please my constituents is a little confusing, but that is what he said. In response to people saying that they did not want four-coach trains, he said that there were going to be longer trains, but there were not going to be so many. But they did not want fewer trains! He was told that he was not meeting an increased demand if he increased the length of trains but decreased the number of trains running. Daily correspondence has continued. The misery line has returned, at least for my constituents.

There was then an exchange between me and the then chairman of the Conservative party. I received a letter from the then chairman in which it was suggested that he had received a complaint from the chairman of National Express, the gentleman in overall charge of c2c. He had written to the party chairman, asking him whether he was aware that one of his colleagues was making life difficult, in a rather disagreeable fashion, by complaining about the c2c service. Now, that is not acceptable. It is gutless. If anyone has a beef, let them meet the MP eyeball to eyeball. Do not go behind their back. Did the chap think that the chairman of the Conservative party was going to tell me off? If he had, he would have got it all guns blazing! That well and truly backfired, and I am never, ever going to forget what that gentleman did. It undermined my role, and the role of all MPs, in representing constituents’ views.

I will now read out a selection of letters I have received about the service:

“They appear to have cancellations, delays and faults virtually every day now, which is extremely frustrating given their previous excellent performance.”

The next one is a letter to c2c:

“I have written to you before, expressing unhappiness about when things go wrong. Passengers are pretty much left to fend for themselves. There seems to be no information at Barking and it is exhausting to keep swapping platforms”—it is quite a journey to get to the other platform—“for services that then do not run or have left by the time you get there. You apologised for the inconvenience and stated that this would be looked into and improved—this clearly has not happened.”

Even today, I received an email alerting me to the fact that there was disruption on the line. The next letter states:

“I am also starting to tire of all the apologies made to the travelling public. Like many others, I would prefer to see real change and proper information given to customers, rather than the current mantra which seems to imply “we can do as we like as long as we say sorry”. My feeling is this is not acceptable given my fare is now well over £3,000 per annum, my second largest bill only to my mortgage.”

It is a lot of money. Here is another one:

“This morning, I checked their website at 6.45am to see if the service was ok. It was. The 7.02 am fast train from Chalkwell was on time. I walked to the station to discover the 7.02 was cancelled. No reason given. I asked c2c on Twitter what happened. Was told it was under investigation. Despite repeated requests for an answer via Twitter, I’ve been ignored and have not received an answer. I will not accept being ignored by them.”

Jolly good show.

The next one reads:

“I shouldn’t have to leave home earlier and get on a slower train but pay more money for the benefit.”

I absolutely agree. Another constituent said that her fare was over £3,000 a year, which again is a lot of money for a poor service. The next one reads:

“The only thing we get from c2c is: don’t worry, more carriages are coming. Carriages are not the answer. The problem is the shambolic timetable.”

The problem is indeed the timetable, which I was told would be good news for constituents. The next one reads:

“I now refuse to take my kids to London on the trains because of the poor state (especially toilets if they are working), but more because I am worried for their safety in such awful conditions.”

The final one reads:

“Still major problems, no end in sight even with new carriages. When will C2C put passengers before the profits of cramming people in to hop between barking and West Ham?”

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister, with the briefing from his wonderful officials, is not going to say, “It will all be fixed because we are going to have new all-singing, all-dancing carriages and more trains”, because that will not fix the problems. Indeed, the design of the new carriages is totally unacceptable. It can only have been done by somebody who does not commute.

There are some very interesting statistics on the performance of the line. From autumn 2015 to January 2016, according to the c2c website, there was a 20% increase in the number of passengers departing from Fenchurch Street in the evening. Surely this is largely due to people using the train as a replacement for the tube between Barking and West Ham. In the same period, there was a 5% increase in the morning at the busiest point. In January 2017, c2c will introduce 24 new carriages along with the new timetable, which promises four more fast services each morning and evening, which will cut journey times by up to six minutes, and a 6% increase in the number of seats.

Nevertheless, the new timetable—yet another new timetable—starting on 9 January 2017 still has most of the trains stopping at Barking and West Ham, which is where a lot of the severe overcrowding occurs, particularly at evening peak time. This is because people can use the c2c line as opposed to the tube to get between Barking and West Ham, which is rather unfair because they are paying the Transport for London tube prices, not the price that c2c customers have to pay. Does c2c receive a financial incentive from TfL to stop at east London stations?

The following figures are calculated on the basis of all trains arriving at Fenchurch Street between 7 o’clock and 9 o’clock and do not count trains that go via “the loop”, which is the wonderful little journey through the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock. It is not that my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East do not want to go via Tilbury or Stanford-le-Hope, and all these other places; it is just that it delays the journey quite a bit.
In 2015, leaving Westcliff between those hours, there were 16 trains and a total of 144 carriages. Under the 2017 timetable—this is the crunch—Westcliff will be served by 13 trains with a total of 136 carriages. That is eight fewer carriages. We are being fed absolute rubbish, and it is insulting to my intelligence and that of my constituents. The figures are exactly the same for Chalkwell. Those with the longest commute—the first six stations on the line—are the worst off. There is an increase in the number of carriages at Leigh—144 in 2015 compared with 152 in 2017—which is great for the residents getting off at Leigh, but reducing the earlier stations will only lead to a bottleneck for commuters. On Friday, c2c also announced a fare increase. That is not its fault—it is in line with Government policy—but still it has rather upset my constituents.

Turning to the Abellio Greater Anglia service, a station that serves commuters from my constituency was upgraded, which is well and good, but my goodness, the line is dire beyond belief. I am not sure whether my hon. Friend was the Minister when the franchise was renewed, but there was a £150 million investment to upgrade the network, which was good. I understand that an agreement was reached with c2c for ticket acceptance between the two lines for 2017 during relevant engineering works, the details of which will be published on the website shortly. Abellio is in negotiations with c2c about ticket acceptance over the festive period, too. However, a constituent wrote to me complaining that “the rolling stock is ridiculously out of date yet they are again increasing the fares...The fares on our line are much higher” and “we can get the tube to London, this surely cannot be classed as an alternative service?...The fares on our line are much higher”. That certainly needs to be sorted out. She asks:

“The trains are out of date”—they certainly are—and “overpriced”, compared with other services. She said:

“I am shocked that this franchise has been given the contract again to run this shocking service.”

I have met the management of Abellio Greater Anglia, and given the others bidding for the line, Abellio was probably the best of those offering to run it. Given that it had also been given money to upgrade services, I was shocked to learn that under the new contract, there would be “a tiny bit of pain for a very long gain”, and that there would be “step change service improvement” to the line, which will have multimillion-pound investment. Judging by some of the complaints that I have received, however, if this “tiny bit of pain” means changes to the timetabling, frequency and capacity of trains, just as we experienced on c2c, Abellio will be held accountable for its reputation by me and my colleagues.

I hope that this railway company will get behind Southend becoming the alternative city of culture next year. If it wants to curry favour with local residents and local MPs, it might consider that it would be wonderful if, when we start our celebrations as the alternative city of culture on 1 January, it sponsored and helped with a few events.

I hope that I will not have to seek another Adjournment debate to raise the same subject next year. I fully understand that the Minister may still be reading his way into the brief, and I am not sure how familiar he is with this line, so I do not expect him to wave a magic wand. However, if he is not able to cover all the points that I have raised, perhaps I, and others, could have a meeting with him and his officials in the new year.

In spite of everything, I wish the staff of c2c, Abellio Greater Anglia, and everyone else, a very happy Christmas and a great new year.

4.30 pm

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con):

I am sure that constituents reading the report of this debate will not fully appreciate the fact that most junior Members of Parliament have only half an hour in which to debate issues of constituency interest. It is a great testament to my parliamentary neighbour that he has secured a three-and-a-half-hour debate, not just once, but twice.

It is also good to see that my hon. Friend, the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) is present. I recall that when I was a Whip, one of the most frustrating things was not being able to ask questions or make speeches. I know that my hon. Friend will be making a beeline for the Minister afterwards and delivering her speech to him in person, bending his ear on all things Thurrock in respect of the c2c service. If I were to give the House a foretaste of that speech in three words, they would be “more rolling stock”—so I think the Minister is forewarned.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) for allowing me to join in the debate. Both c2c and Abellio lines pass through his constituency, but both of them terminate in mine. We certainly do not want to see a return to the misery line. I am slightly more “glass half full” than my hon. Friend, but as he has made clear, our constituency experiences are different.
During the initial timetable consultation I met Julian Drury, and raised concerns from the outset. Once things began to go wrong. I looked back at the letter that I had sent him following our conversation, and was quite shocked by the clarity and strength of my language and how assertive I had been in saying that they would go wrong. I would have wished to be proved wrong myself, but, alas, I was not.

I wanted a reversion to the faster trains that had taken my constituents to London, and I adopted terminology similar to that which had been used by the campaigners for faster trains on the line between Norwich and London. I was asking for all trains from Shoeburyness to London to travel that distance in less than 60 minutes, which I think is a critical point. Train journeys from Shoeburyness can take about an hour and 10 minutes. The company has listened, and some trains manage 59 minutes, but it would be very useful if, over the years, we could reach a point at which they all took less than 59 minutes.

The Department could be helpful in this regard. c2c has some of the highest punctuality rates, but—it may seem rather odd for me to say this—I think that we should give it permission to be less punctual. If on four days out of five we arrived two minutes later than advertised, it would be good if, on the other days, we arrived five minutes earlier than we currently do. That would particularly benefit constituents in Shoeburyness, at the extremity of the line. A friend of mine used to run the line at night from Shoeburyness all the way to Fenchurch Street in only 32 minutes. Admittedly there were no other trains on the line, and, admittedly they did not stop at any of the stations, let alone all of them, but his point was that it was possible to pick up time along the line so that the journey would always take less than 59 minutes.

The new timetable precipitated other problems. Everyone was coming back from the Christmas holiday, and the changes in London had clearly not been thought through. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock will point out to the Minister later that Transport for London made a number of representations, with quite a narrow focus, for people travelling between Barking and West Ham, to the disadvantage of our constituents in Southend, Thurrock and Rochford.

Following the problems, a meeting was held in my constituency offices by c2c and Shana Doherty, who had organised a petition, to discuss what could be done to rectify some of the problems. There has been incremental change. I think a full reversion to the old timetable would be wrong; as I have said, I want to speed up some trains, rather than simply revert to the old timetable. Some of the rolling stock will help, although I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West that the design is not perfect. I travelled on one of those trains, not since they have been used during rush hour, but on a special trip with local people to see what they were like, just before they were introduced, and some things were obviously wrong. There were big sections for luggage, as if we were travelling to Heathrow or Gatwick, for instance, whereas it is quite rare to see someone coming down the line with large items of luggage. I made that point and was told that those areas could have been got rid of and an extra two seats put in, but that would have required quite a big change, whereas there were these standard trains that could be bought, which were new, but had that format. It was easier to get them in quickly. It seems somewhat incongruous to have that sort of luggage space, however.

Some people further down the line have been critical of the removal of the three-seat rows. They see that as a kind of metro-isation of the service, which I oppose. I must admit that as a slightly larger person, I am rather sympathetic to the case for two-seat rows. Some 10 years ago, my doctor said I was borderline obese, which, although actually true, I thought was a little unfair, but I have noticed that even much smaller people prefer to stand than sit three abreast, which is socially uncomfortable. The rules on seat-sizing could be changed further by the Department. However, for my constituents, the configuration of the new rolling stock certainly is a benefit.

I fully appreciate that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West has had many problems with c2c and in his dialogue with it, and finds the correspondence with the chairman slightly troubling and wrong-footed. From my point of view, Julian Drury has actually been quite good, and is one of the better representatives of big business working with the community. I cannot explain the difference in experience; perhaps it is in part due to the fact that my constituents get on the services earlier and do not have quite the same problems. Indeed, I have not had the experience that my hon. Friend has had of the problems in Basildon and the misery line and so on.

The Abellio service was shocking, and on the face of it, it was an incredible surprise that someone running such a shocking service got reappointed. In reality, Abellio’s hands were very much tied by the investment it could put in under the old contract, and it was quite clever in making sure that the tendering document required everyone to step up; as a result, we could not get anyone coming in to run the rubbish stock. To be frank, I felt that my suit needed to be dry-cleaned if I sat on the seats, yet the service is more expensive than c2c. That is because, again, there is a legislative problem in the way Departments have handled these things over the past two decades; the misery line, as it was, was cheaper to take into account the fact that it was pretty crap. Now it is the happy line, but fare increases have been proportionate across all tracks. Fares have all gone up at the same rate, and the differential from when it was not the happy line has been coded in.

We can make changes. The announcements in the urgent question earlier today on rail and track reunification will greatly help the rail services in Southend, particularly the c2c line, as 80% of it is used only by c2c. There are other parts of the country where that would be less useful, however.

I want to mention a third train line in my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West looks confused, but he forgets that there is a train on the pier. The pier train line is subject to exactly the same rules and regulations as the other train lines, and it is difficult for the local council to get in the right expertise to run that line. I gently probed Julian Drury and Rob Tinlin, the chief executive of Southend Borough Council, who has done an excellent job over the past 10 years in Southend and, sadly, is due to leave. I asked them whether c2c could take over that 1.3-mile train service, because it has the expertise to do so. Furthermore, I suggested that we introduce through-ticketing, so that people could come from London to Southend Central,
and then, after a short walk, get to the end of the pier. That would encourage them to spend more money there, it would be a nice publicity stunt, and it would bring in the expertise of a professional railway firm—particularly if there was rail and track reunification—and its greater understanding of track issues. It would then be running more pleasure down to the end of Southend pier.

Julian Drury is, in my view, rather better than my hon. Friend thinks he is, and we both agree that Rob Tinlin is fantastic. Having raised this issue with them a few years ago, I rather hoped that it would come back as a council or c2c idea. Sadly, that has not happened, and in this debate I would like to nudge them a little bit further in that direction.

4.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to be called here once again to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who, in his customary style, has regaled us with tales of what is occurring on rail services to Southend. He invited me to shock him in my response to his speech. Perhaps a “shock and awe” strategy is not precisely what his railway line needs, but I urge him never to stop campaigning on behalf of his constituents. To me, he is the Duracell bunny of Members of Parliament in this regard. Ever since I was elected, he has never been less than enthusiastic every step of the way. So if he chooses to raise an issue, far be it from me to say that there is no issue at all.

If I can beg my hon. Friend’s indulgence, I will—if I dare—start by being slightly positive about his railway line. As he might be aware, c2c is actually one of the best performing franchises in the UK, second only to Merseyrail, and it conceded first place only recently. As of 12 November, the percentage of trains arriving at their destination within five minutes of their booked time—also known as their public performance measure—was 95%. As many hon. Members have rightly pointed out, this stands in stark contrast to the late 1990s when the line was known as the misery line. Going back to autumn 2000, passenger satisfaction was as low as 63%, but it now stands at 81%, although that represents a small decline from the high of 89% that it achieved in the previous national rail passenger survey. However, I expect c2c to have improved on that in the autumn national rail passenger survey that will shortly be announced. When I say that I expect that, I mean that I want the outcome to be achieved.

We have come a fair way since those days. The necessary infrastructure work and replacement rolling stock have helped to deliver one of the better performing commuter railways in the UK, with over 24 million passenger journeys a year. As recently as 2015, c2c won the passenger operator of the year award at a prestigious industry awards ceremony. Its customer-interfacing app, c2c Live, won the innovation award for passenger experience at the 2015 Railway Industry Innovation Awards. So we can find some good things to say about c2c’s performance.

However, as my hon. Friend is aware, c2c’s performance has begun to suffer once again, especially in the last couple of months. A significant factor has been an unprecedented number and length of temporary speed restrictions imposed by Network Rail due to the London clay in the area expanding in response to the change in the weather. This opens up small voids underneath the track and, for safety reasons, trains are therefore required to reduce their speed in those areas. In order to address these and other challenges, c2c has intensified its engagement with Network Rail. The company recognises that other issues, such as fleet reliability, are well within its control, and it is working with its suppliers to address them urgently. Today, for example, a lorry has unfortunately struck a bridge between Southend East and Thorpe Bay, which has meant that c2c will need to make adjustments to its evening timetable while emergency inspections are carried out on the damage to the infrastructure. I, and no doubt my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, will be keeping a close eye on the progress of that work.

I turn now to the issue in hand and the December 2015 timetable. More and more people are using our railways. Passenger journeys on the rail network have more than doubled since rail privatisation, and the picture is no different for c2c. The number of passengers travelling into London on c2c’s morning peak services has risen by 15% since 2010. c2c has had to listen to stakeholders up and down the route to understand what they want, which is more services, better connectivity with the three inner-London stations and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, and along the whole route, have undoubtedly benefited. The number of seats arriving into Fenchurch Street between 8 am and 9 am from Westcliff and from Chalkwell increased by 12% and from Leigh-on-Sea by 53%. The increase in capacity at those stations is more than the increase in morning peak demand.

The attractiveness of the new timetable brought more passengers than forecast to south Essex stations in the morning peak. In other words, it almost became a victim of its own success with an increase of 9.3% when compared with autumn 2015. That inevitably had similar effects during the evening peak of people leaving London to return to south Essex. All that was further exacerbated by the obligation to stop 95% of trains at Limehouse, West Ham and Barking. This greater connectivity for long-distance commuters was welcomed by key stakeholders on the route. However, the new service pattern provided a faster journey than the District line between the stations, and therein lies the rub. That prompted passengers who previously used the tube to use c2c services, especially those requiring Barking. That led to overcrowding, not least in the evening peak. It was a genuine cause for concern, as my hon. Friend rightly identified at the time.

As a consequence of my hon. Friend’s observations and those of other campaigns, c2c took some action to reduce overcrowding. For example, in response to my hon. Friend’s specific concerns, I understand that the 7.15 am from Shoeburyness, a morning peak service which travels fast along the entire route, was lengthened from eight carriages to 12, providing more space for
passengers. c2c also used its excellent, and unique, on-board automatic passenger counting system to fine tune the timetable yet further. Other changes reduced from four to just two the number of services departing with people standing during the morning peak from the three stations serving my hon. Friend’s constituency. Those two services are fast, and services either side have seats available. Understandably, my hon. Friend’s constituents are choosing to travel on those direct services as a result of the fast journeys into London. c2c also increased the number of seats from Fenchurch Street by 1,000 between 5 pm and 6 pm and removed the Barking stops. As a result, eight services leaving Fenchurch Street in the evening peak do not stop at Barking. Following the positive changes made to hone the timetable in January, c2c also made use of the timetable change date in May 2016 to further improve services for passengers. Primarily, this involved reducing Barking stops on a further five services in the evening peak, with the effect of reducing the number of services leaving Fenchurch Street in the evening peak with passengers standing from 31 to 24. Clearly, 24 remains too many, but that does demonstrate that progress is being made. This is because the removal of these stops further reduced the attractiveness of the c2c service compared with the District line, thus reducing overcrowding for c2c’s evening commuters. c2c plans to make further changes in January 2017. Specifically, it will start a train from Laindon at 7.31 am, as requested by the Laindon user group, and, for the reasons I stated earlier, further stops are to be withdrawn in the evening peak at Barking.

My hon. Friend also mentioned some issues relating to the Abellio franchise and concerns his constituents might have had. I draw to his attention, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East did, the fact that the new Abellio Greater Anglia franchise is one of the most ambitious ever embarked upon by this Department. With £1.4 billion of investment, I am sure that travellers across that network will welcome the fact that we will be replacing every piece of rolling stock on that franchise. That can only be good news for people, not just in East Anglia, but those at Bombardier, in Derby, who will be making the carriages. By 2021, there will be more than 32,000 more seats on services arriving at Liverpool Street in the morning peak. There will be an extra train per hour, in addition to the existing three, between Liverpool Street and Southend Victoria, with two new fast peak journeys in each direction between the two. That comes in addition to the major station enhancement that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West referred to, so there is good news also in the Abellio franchise.

My hon. Friend is, however, right to point out the need to continue to improve rolling stock across the network as a whole. Twenty-four new carriages are being phased into service across the network by the end of December and they will provide 13,000 extra seats at peak times every week. From October 2019, a further 12 carriages will be introduced, meaning that by the end of that year the new franchise will have introduced a total of 36 additional vehicles into service on the route.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East rightly mentioned issues relating to accessibility and departmental rules on rolling stock. We have a looming deadline of 31 December 2019 to ensure that every rail carriage on our network meets the regulations on persons with reduced mobility. That is an unmovable target and we have to abide by it. I also point out, because it was alluded to, that this is an enclosed network between London and Southend, which makes it ripe for a number of attempts to improve the service, not just in terms of bringing train and track together, as the Secretary of State has announced today, but in terms of investigating whether we can progress with digital signalling on this part of the network. Members will have noted that in the autumn statement it was set out that the Treasury will be investing £450 million to roll out digital signalling across the network in the coming years. All that is good news, and I echo the hope that if c2c can manage to run a railway from London and Shoeburyness, it can offer some practical help on a 1.5 mile stretch down a pier. Our piers are very important to our coastal towns, as I well know, so I hope that c2c will hear this debate and think about the practical support it can offer on that.

Let me go back to being positive about c2c—I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West to forgive me for that—as it is leading the way on compensation. Since February, c2c has provided automatic compensation of 3p per minute for registered smartcard customers when their train is delayed by between two and 29 minutes, which is over and above what we are committed to as a Government nationally under Delay Repay 15. Indeed, the standard delay repay bandwidth of 30 minutes-plus has already been automated and there will be further automation for those with smartcards when we move to Delay Repay 15. My officials are shortly to commence engagement with c2c to agree the timescales for implementation. That is an important way of putting the interests of passengers first. Nobody wants to see delays on the network, but when they do occur, it is important not only that we make that compensation available, but that we make it as easy as possible for passengers to claim.

I noted the concerns that were raised regarding passenger information during disruption. It is a frequent bugbear that I also hear from rail users. They say that, while they are having breakfast at home, they look at their mobile, their iPad or social media to check that their usual train will be leaving on time and that all is going according to plan. Their smartphone tells them that the train is good to go and that it is on time. They arrive at the station only to find that the train was cancelled hours ago. There is a fundamental disconnect between the social media information being put out and the information that is available at stations. It is a matter that Transport Focus, the passenger watchdog, is looking at very closely. I have asked it to accelerate work on that so that all train operating companies, particularly in commuter areas, ensure that, when information is available, it is put out on every channel at the same time and that there is no discrepancy between one source of information and another. In industry parlance, we speak of a single source of truth. That is what customers need as well.

In conclusion, c2c is delivering more seats, more services and an improved journey experience for its passengers. I urge it to continue to engage with key stakeholders, including local Members of Parliament, and to make the necessary changes to address the overcrowding that arises from the fact that its current timetable is attractive to customers. There is an absolute
commitment on the part of both the operator and the
Department to ensure that the passenger is at the forefront
of decision making with regard to these changes.

I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend the
Member for Southend West and I extend that invitation
to MPs on the entire line of route, most of whom are
gathered in the Chamber today. I will if I may invite
Julian Drury along as well. We can then have a very
informed debate on how to improve one of our better
performing commuter networks to make it perform
even better.

Question put and agreed to.

4.57 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 7 December 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Security

2. Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland. [907640]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): Yesterday, I laid before the House the 10th biannual statement to Parliament on the security situation in Northern Ireland. The terrorist threat level in Northern Ireland remains unchanged at severe, meaning that an attack is highly likely. The need for vigilance remains, and I pay tribute to the brave men and women who work tirelessly to keep communities safe.

Mrs Murray: I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins), for meeting me recently, when I was able to tell him about my constituent. I understand that the Secretary of State is unable to discuss that individual case, but does he agree that any security review must take account of such legacy cases?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, Mrs Murray, and colleagues from across the House who will—

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Secretary of State will be aware of recent footage that has emerged of dissident republicans, heavily armed and carrying rocket launchers, in Ardoyne, part of north Belfast, near where Michael McGibbon was murdered recently. It was a scandalous and appalling display. Does the Secretary of State agree that the police, who have been very quick to arrest and charge people for very minor breaches of parading legislation, really need to get a grip on those kinds of displays and arrest and pursue people, because the people in these communities absolutely do not want those kinds of displays of paramilitary activity?

James Brokenshire: I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s sentiments. The video is utterly repugnant. In my statement yesterday, I pointed out that support for such dissident groups “remains limited, despite their attempts to seek legitimacy in a wider society which continues to reject their use of violence.”—[Official Report, 6 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 12WS.]

That contemptible video was intended to be a show of strength, but I see it as a sign of weakness, and it is important that the PSNI continues its investigations.

Mr Dodds: I agree with the Secretary of State and commend the widow of Michael McGibbon, who has spoken so bravely against these people, and who has, unfortunately, been forced out of her home. Her words are a ringing endorsement of the peace process and the political process in Northern Ireland. On tackling dissidents, the cross-border joint agency taskforce, set up under the “Fresh Start” agreement, is doing great work. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State updated us on the work that it is doing to tackle dissident republicans and other criminal gangs.

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman is right to mention the very brave testimony of Joanne McGibbon. Our thoughts are with all those who have lost loved ones to terrorism. This House should continue to send out that strong and important message. The joint agency taskforce, which brings together different agencies to confront organised criminality and those linked to terrorism, is doing very good work, and we need to do more of it.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Given that the threat level in Northern Ireland is still severe, is the Secretary of State satisfied with the level of intelligence sharing in the Province?

James Brokenshire: Some very good work is taking place among our agencies in Northern Ireland, as well as those in the Republic of Ireland. That is in a stronger position. Of course, there is still room for further improvement, but significant seizures of arms and weaponry have been made as a consequence of that work. It is important to underline that.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): My constituent, Austin Hunter, was an outstanding journalist who covered the security situation in Northern Ireland for many years. He was not only a brilliant journalist and a great family man, but a remarkably fine man in his own right. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to join me—and colleagues from across the House who will have known Austin Hunter as a distinguished journalist in Northern Ireland—in sending condolences to his family, who are absolutely devastated by his death in a tragic traffic accident in Bahrain over the weekend?

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Lady for that. Although I did not have the privilege of meeting Austin Hunter, I know, from all the powerful testimony that I have heard, not only that he was an incredible journalist, but how warm and human he was. It was a tragic accident, and I join the hon. Lady in sending my condolences to his friends and family, and everyone who knew him. He clearly made a remarkable contribution, and he will be missed by so many.
Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): People who give information to the police about terrorist activities have saved many lives in the past, and continue to do so today. Is it not entirely wrong to claim, as some groups do in Northern Ireland, that any case that involves an agent somehow also involves police misconduct?

James Brokenshire: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct that we save lives as a consequence of the support of people in communities, often at great personal cost. That should be recognised, in terms of some of the really powerful intelligence that is provided and the impact that it has.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I congratulate the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other security agencies on stopping a number of terrorist attacks. Would the Secretary of State give us some information on whether dissident terrorists are still recruiting and increasing in numbers in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: As the hon. Gentleman will have seen in my written statement yesterday, there is an enduring threat from terrorism, which is why I underlined the need for vigilance. Support for those terrorists remains limited, but we must continue to be aware and confront it in every way, which is why I pay tribute to the work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the successes that have been achieved. Equally, however, we must remain absolutely focused on security issues, which underlines the points that I made in yesterday’s statement.

12. [907650] Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that service personnel, who put their lives on the line for our security on a daily basis, including former paratrooper Lance Corporal J, who was arrested and questioned in November last year, or other former members of the Parachute Regiment who had to go to the High Court to battle against detention and extradition, should not face legal reprisals, which may be taken for political reasons?

James Brokenshire: I hope that my hon. Friend understands that I cannot comment on individual cases. I will be unswerving and unyielding in underlining the huge contribution of our armed forces in helping to bring about the peace that we enjoy today. Part of that is the rule of law. Where there is evidence of criminality, it is important that the rule of law is upheld, but I know very clearly the incredible contribution that many members of our armed forces have made.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the prospect of a hard border would provide opportunities for organised crime and would cause additional problems for the security services, including police services? Does he therefore agree that it is essential that Brexit does not result in a hard border?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady has heard me say on a number of occasions that I do not want a return to the borders of the past. Part of that, yes, is about the politics, but it is also about how we ensure that that continued good relationship between us and the Irish Government is maintained, and security is a key factor in that.

Security Service Personnel

3. Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the protection of data relating to security service personnel who are based in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): The safety and security of all those serving in the PSNI, prisons and security forces in Northern Ireland is of the utmost importance to this Government. We keep under careful review arrangements and advice to support their protection.

Ian Paisley: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. He will know from his previous role that any breach of the security data of a member of the security services poses an obvious threat and risk to them and their families. Will he undertake a desktop review of all data handling and the security of postal communications between the Northern Ireland Office and security personnel, both former and serving? Will he also undertake to press this matter with the Department of Justice, as it must join up with the NIO to tackle this?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman has raised an individual case with me, and I shall write to him with my response. I do take the security of information relating to people who serve by guarding and protecting us very, very seriously. I meet the military, the PSNI and the Justice Minister: I undertake to raise the importance of ensuring the appropriate protection of the personal data of security force members at the next meeting and to consider the issue further.

Stormont House Agreement

4. Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to build consensus across Northern Ireland on establishing the legacy bodies included in the Stormont House agreement.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): I continue to meet victims groups, the Executive and others to establish the legacy bodies set out in the Stormont House agreement. When I am confident that there is sufficient political consensus, I intend to move to a public phase, to allow wider community consideration and to build confidence and momentum behind the creation of the new legacy bodies.

Craig Whittaker: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that the legacy bodies in the Stormont House agreement operate in ways that are fair, balanced, impartial and proportionate if we are to counter the one-sided focus on cases involving the state, whereas over 90% of deaths in the troubles were caused by terrorists?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and important point. I agree that the legacy bodies must be balanced and proportionate. That was at the
heart of the phraseology in the Stormont House agreement and will be important in delivering that more balanced approach.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Part of addressing the legacy of the past is breaking down divisions that exist today. Will the Secretary of State therefore join me in expressing sympathy to the family of Danny Murphy, the secretary of the Ulster Gaelic Athletic Association, who died this morning and who worked tirelessly to build peace and reconciliation and to bring people together through sport? He is a loss to us all and to that vital work.

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing to the attention of the House the sad death of Danny Murphy. I am sure that we all extend our condolences to his friends and family. It is worth reflecting at this time on the powerful way in which sport can unite people and bring them together.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State recognise the sheer hypocrisy of republicans who seek 100% transparency on 10% of the deaths in the troubles, but offer none in return? Until they do, and until they offer the assurance that they will give information about the killings, deaths and murders that they were responsible for, it will be incredibly difficult to build the consensus that we need.

James Brokenshire: It is important for everyone to work together to move the process on. That is why I continue to commit significant efforts and work to doing just that. The hon. Gentleman is right: at present, the system is heavily focused on the 10% rather than the 90%, and the balanced, proportionate measures that I put forward will assist in changing that.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): First, I associate myself with the tributes paid both to the fine journalist Austin Hunter and to the fíor Gaeil Danny Murphy, who was with the tributes paid both to the fine journalist Austin Hunter and to the fíor Gaeil Danny Murphy, who was with the tributes paid both to the fine journalist Austin Hunter and to the fíor Gaeil Danny Murphy, who was...
Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): Recent reports in the United States show that advice given by our civil servants to the US State Department prior to the referendum was that it need not do any preparatory work, because “Brexit can’t possibly happen, so don’t worry about it.” Was the same crass advice being given by the NIO to our partners, and especially to the Irish Government?

Kris Hopkins: I do not recognise the comments that have just been made. We have an extremely good relationship with the Irish Government. We will continue that dialogue and work with them.

Businesses

6. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to consult businesses in Northern Ireland on strengthening the Northern Ireland economy. [907644]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Kris Hopkins): The Secretary of State has established a business advisory group to help understand the economic priorities of the Northern Ireland business community. A series of sectoral meetings have already been held with key industrial sectors, including the agricultural food sector, manufacturing and the creative industries.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. What impact will the Government’s industrial strategy have in revamping the private sector in Northern Ireland, and what discussions is he having with the Executive on this topic?

Kris Hopkins: It is important to recognise the huge contribution—some £23 billion—that is incorporated in the industrial strategy, and also to recognise the movement and growth in private sector business, with some 14,410 jobs created in the last year alone.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I am sure the Minister will agree that the lowering of corporation tax in Northern Ireland will certainly help the economy and companies. However, will he also agree that one area we all need to concentrate on is productivity and the recruitment of new apprentices?

Kris Hopkins: I do recognise the points the hon. Gentleman makes. We are working closely with the Executive to raise productivity. They have a really important budget coming up, and we have made a commitment of around £250 million of capital investment to assist in that process.

10. [907648] David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): Does my hon. Friend welcome the additional £250 million of capital expenditure that is being provided to the Northern Ireland Executive in the autumn statement? Does he agree that it will create a real opportunity for the Executive to invest in important infrastructure?

Kris Hopkins: I completely agree with that statement. There has been huge growth in jobs in Northern Ireland—nearly 60,000 new jobs since 2010. We need to keep building on the great steps that have been made, and the Government working with the Executive is a key part of that.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): May I, too, associate myself with the condolences offered in respect of Danny Murphy, who was my constituent for many years? He was a powerful force for reconciliation and mutual understanding, not only on the island of Ireland but between Ireland and Britain. May I also ask the Minister to consider the recent report on apprenticeships from the all-party group on the visitor economy, with particular reference to fiscal flexibilities?

Kris Hopkins: May I offer my condolences to Danny Murphy’s family as well?

I recognise the impact that tourism has on the hon. Lady’s constituency. The Mourne mountains are a great attraction, and the Newcastle air show in the first week of August is really important for the local economy. I hope that I can also make a contribution to that in the near future.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): The campaign to give powers to the Assembly to reduce corporation tax united all political parties in Northern Ireland and pretty well the whole of business in Northern Ireland. A business in Craigavon told me that it would double its turnover and its workforce if the rates were down to those of the Republic. Will the Minister guarantee that he and the Secretary of State will use every opportunity to push the Assembly and the Executive to get this through?

Kris Hopkins: I recognise the contribution that my right hon. Friend has made in trying to achieve this. It is right that we challenge the Executive, and fiscal responsibility is an important part of that process. There is an important budget coming up at the moment, and there is ongoing dialogue between the NIO and the Executive.

Stormont House and Fresh Start Agreements

7. Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): What progress has been made on the implementation of the Stormont House and “Fresh Start” agreements. [907645]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): Good progress has been made on implementing the agreements. This includes legislation on welfare reform, a joint agency taskforce to tackle crime, an Executive strategy to disband paramilitary groups and an independent reporting commission to report on progress towards ending paramilitary activity.

Edward Argar: Both agreements contain important provisions to place the finances of the Northern Ireland Executive on a sustainable footing, which is vital to the continued economic success of Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State enlarge on progress in these specific areas?

James Brokenshire: I think that we have made significant progress. Considering the position this time last year, there have been important steps forward, but there are still additional steps to be taken, including the establishment
of an independent fiscal council to publish an annual report on the Executive’s finances and to give further assurance on progress.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson** (Lagan Valley) (DUP): May I associate myself and my colleagues with the tributes paid to Austin Hunter and to Danny Murphy?

Will the Secretary of State give an assurance that he will not allow the Stormont House and “Fresh Start” agreements to be unpicked? Crucially, in relation to legacy issues, will he hold fast on national security and not allow those who want to rewrite the history of the past to do so?

**James Brokenshire**: I am very clear on the need to continue to make progress in relation to Stormont House and “Fresh Start”. There have been significant steps forward. Equally, though, I will not be party to a rewriting of the issues of the past, and that is why a proportionate approach is required.

**Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): Part of the Stormont House agreement involves the legacy issues. Almost weekly, news items prejudice up-and-coming cases by giving just one side of the story. Will the Secretary of State take action so that we do not have future cases prejudiced by stories in the newspapers, or will he pause the legacy issues?

**James Brokenshire**: It is important that the rule of law is clearly upheld and that appropriate investigations are undertaken. However, I make the point that I made earlier about the imbalance within the existing system: 90% of those who lost their lives lost them as a consequence of terrorism. That is why the new bodies are important to deliver a balanced, proportionate approach.

**UK Decision to Leave the EU: Ireland**

8. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Irish Government on the implications of the UK’s decision to leave the EU. [907646]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): I have met and will continue to meet counterparts in the Irish Government as we prepare for the UK’s exit from the EU. The UK-Irish relationship has never been stronger. In the coming months, we will deepen co-operation and secure a deal that works in the interests of Northern Ireland and the best interests of the island of Ireland.

**Mary Robinson**: In recognising the closeness and importance of the relationship between the United Kingdom and Ireland, will my right hon. Friend assure the House that while there can be no question of the border issue. A critical aspect of our approach is that assurance about the significance and importance of the border issue. A critical aspect of our approach is that we do not see a return to the borders of the past.

Mr **David Anderson** (Blaydon) (Lab): Last week, in response to a written question on the status and rights of UK state pensioners living in the Republic of Ireland post-Brexit, I was told by Department for Work and Pensions Ministers that that was a matter for negotiation. They simply do not know what the future of those people is. What will the Secretary of State do to get this issue resolved as a matter of urgency? Is this not yet another example of why he should be a permanent member of the Brexit team, not just an add-on?

**James Brokenshire**: I can say to the hon. Gentleman in terms that we are playing a key role in ensuring that there is a UK-wide negotiation and that the interests of Northern Ireland are heard loud and clear in those negotiations. One of the aspects of that is the Ireland Act 1949—the rights of Irish citizens in the United Kingdom—and that is part of the work that we are doing.
PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [907701] Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 7 December.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): I have been asked to reply. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is visiting the Gulf Co-operation Council summit in Bahrain.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Dr Whitford: Yesterday’s signing of a memorandum of understanding with Houston spaceport and the Rice Space Institute brings the reality of a Prestwick spaceport closer, with the huge boost that that could give to the UK aerospace industry. Will the UK Government join the Scottish Government in supporting an Ayrshire growth deal to literally get this off the ground?

Mr Lidington: I can certainly assure the hon. Lady that the Government are looking keenly at the opportunities for Scotland, and indeed the whole United Kingdom, arising from the possible future development of commercial space operations. The Ayrshire project that she has described will, I am sure, be examined closely by my ministerial colleagues who are particularly concerned about this area of policy. We definitely want to see the UK as a pioneer in seizing these new commercial opportunities.

Q2. [907701] Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Perhaps thinking of rail passengers trying to get to their jobs, the general secretary of the TUC has spoken of shafted and abandoned” workers, while Unite’s Len McCluskey is doing a UKIP dance move by resigning before trying to return. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister speak to his members to get back to work?

Mr Lidington: I can certainly assure the hon. Lady that the Government are treating the situation with the utmost seriousness. The need to secure the best deal for passengers and workers is a priority for the Government, who are working together to secure the best deal for passengers.

I have to say that the RMT’s action shows co-ordinated contempt for the travelling public, and it seems designed to do nothing except to bring about the maximum damage to people’s lives—[Interruption.] There is some heckling from Opposition Members. The Conservative party is on the side of rail passengers, and I hope that the Labour party will join me in saying to the rail union leaders, “Sort it out. Put the travelling public first. Stop the squabbling, and tell your members to get back to work.”

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Pearl Harbour attack, in which thousands of American service personnel and civilians died. The next day, Winston Churchill summoned Parliament to debate the British response and said:

“It is indispensable to our system of government that Parliament should play its full part in all the important acts of State”.—[Official Report, 8 December 1941; Vol. 376, c. 1358.]

These words are a vital reminder that even at a time of crisis—in fact, especially at a time of national crisis—the role of Parliament is central.

In the same spirit, we welcome the Government’s decision to accept our motion today; they will show Parliament their plan for Brexit before article 50 is triggered. May I ask the Leader of the House one central question about this plan: do the Government want the UK to remain part of the customs union?

Mr Lidington: I join the hon. Lady in marking the anniversary of Pearl Harbour and remembering all those who lost their lives at that time, and also in marking—with a sense of some celebration, even—the fact that Prime Minister Abe is joining President Obama in going to Pearl Harbour. He is the first Japanese Prime Minister so to do, and that sign of reconciliation and putting ancient conflicts behind them is welcome.

To turn to the hon. Lady’s point about Europe, the Government have always made it clear that we would seek to give additional clarity about our position at the earliest opportunity, but it has been the case, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said many times, that one of our core objectives will be to secure the maximum freedom for British companies both to have access to and to operate within the single European market.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Leader of the House for that answer, but I respectfully say to him that surely on this issue the answer should be straightforward. We all know that it would be a disaster for British business if we did not remain part of the customs union. The Leader of the House said himself in February:

“Everything we take for granted...—trade...without customs checks or paperwork at national frontiers...—would all be up in the air... It is massive what is at risk.”

On this side of the House, we would agree with him—we could not agree with him more—so can he put it beyond doubt and tell us right now: do the Government want the UK to stay in the customs union?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady and I—she is right—both argued passionately for the remain cause during the referendum. What separates us now is that I am part of a Conservative Government who are working together to respect the democratic verdict of the British people and to secure the best possible outcome for the prosperity and security of the entire United Kingdom from the negotiations, whereas the hon. Lady, even just two months ago, was telling us that she wanted “to go back to the British people in some way”. She needs to decide whether she accepts the democratic verdict or not.
Emily Thornberry: Of course we accept the democratic decision of the British public—[Hon. Members: “Ah!”] Of course we do. The difference between our side of the House and the Government side is that we want to leave the European Union on behalf of 100%—on behalf of the whole of this nation.

We really need a straightforward answer to a straightforward question. Leaving the customs union would mean having to check every container coming in at Dover. It would mean UK firms having proof of origin tests whenever they export to Europe. It would mean chaos and it would mean gridlock for cross-border supply chains. As the Leader of the House said in May, I believe about lamb and beef exports,

“They go tariff free, they go without any extra...checks...you cannot guarantee any of that if we are outside.”

Again, Labour Members agree with what he said six months ago. The question is: does he still agree with himself?

Mr Lidington: I thought it had not escaped even the hon. Lady’s attention that there has been a rather significant referendum since February. That changes the context in which we are now having to operate. We face a deep, challenging and wide-ranging negotiation, and it would be harmful to the national interest for me or other Ministers to engage in the sort of detailed exposition of our negotiating position that she is now pressing upon me. None of the other 27 Governments are doing that; nor should we.

Emily Thornberry: Dear oh dear. We are not asking for details; we are asking about a central plank of the negotiations. If the right hon. Gentleman cannot give us an answer on the customs union—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Both the questions and the answers will be heard. If the juvenile behaviour could stop, that would be really helpful to the scrutiny process.

Emily Thornberry: We have not had an answer on the customs union as a whole, so may I ask the right hon. Gentleman a question about one specific point? Since 1993, there have been no customs checks on the land border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. In May, when visiting Northern Ireland, he said that if the UK “were not part of the customs union...there would have to be customs checks at the border.”

He also said that for anyone to pretend otherwise “flies in the face of reality.”

Will he confirm that that remains the position? If that is right, he really must make it clear today that the Government are determined to avoid that situation.

Mr Lidington: The Prime Minister and the Northern Ireland Secretary have repeatedly made it clear that we want the very long-standing common travel and free trade arrangements across the Irish border to continue, as indeed do the Irish Government. We are actively engaged in talking both to the Northern Ireland Executive and to the Government of the Republic of Ireland about those matters. There is goodwill on all sides towards trying to reach a solution that works for people north and south of the border.

Emily Thornberry: The Leader of the House has made the familiar arguments—he cannot give answers; it is all to be resolved through negotiations; Brexit means Brexit; Brexit means breakfast—but that was not what the Secretary of State for Brexit said when he was asked about the customs union in September. He said that he had looked at the matter carefully and that “that is exactly the sort of decision that we will resolve before we trigger article 50.”—[Official Report, 5 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 54.]

If the Government are going to decide their position on this issue before 31 March, will the Leader of the House confirm that the British people and the British Parliament will be told some answers to my questions before the Government tell the rest of Europe?

Mr Lidington: If the answers sound familiar, it might be because we need constant repetition before the hon. Lady understands and appreciates the principal argument. The Government are at the moment engaged in a consultation with more than 50 sectors of United Kingdom business to ascertain precisely which aspects of European Union membership work well for them, which they see as harmful and where the opportunities beyond EU membership lie. We will come to a decision and we will go into negotiations on behalf of the full 100% of the United Kingdom population and all four nations of the UK.

Emily Thornberry: The fact is—the Leader of the House knows it, as do we all—that he can consult as much as he likes, but the answer will come back that we should be part of the customs union. It is hugely disappointing that on a day when the Government are committing to greater transparency on their intentions for Brexit, we are getting the usual stonewalling. We have a Government who are promising to tell us the plan, while refusing to give us answers to the most basic of questions, and who are promising to give Parliament a say, while spending we do not know how much taxpayers’ money across the road in the Supreme Court trying to stop Parliament from having a say on this. In short, we have a Government who cannot tell us the plan because they do not have a plan. In February, the Leader of the House said that what he was hearing from the leave campaign was “confusing, contradictory, nonsense”. My final question is this: are we hearing anything different from the Government today?

Mr Lidington: We will publish, before article 50 is triggered, a statement about our negotiating strategy and objectives, as the Prime Minister said yesterday. The hon. Lady seems to be in a state of utter denial about the consequences that flow from the referendum decision. No other EU Government are seeking to reverse or question the legitimacy of that vote in the way that she and a number of her colleagues are still trying to do. I am afraid that that just indicates how distant the Labour party now is from any aspirations to be back in government again. We watch them in action, quarrelling like “Mutiny on the Bounty” as re-shot by the “Carry On” team. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise. I want to hear the words flowing. There is no reason why the Chair should be denied the hearing of these matters. It is very important.
Mr Lidington: They are rudderless. They are drifting on Europe, as on so many other aspects of policy. It is little wonder that so many decent working people, who for generations looked to Labour to be their champion, have given up in despair and are turning to the Conservative party as the authentic voice of working families.

Q3. [907702] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In 1943, a 16-year-old girl was forcibly taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she witnessed the horrors of the death camps. On liberation, she came to this country with her mother. She raised a family and became a nurse. She dedicated her life to making sure the people of this country and beyond know the horrors of the Holocaust. Last week, that lady turned 90. Kitty Hart-Moxon is with us today at Prime Minister’s Question Time. [Applause.] Will my right hon. Friend join me, and I think the whole House, in wishing Kitty a very happy belated birthday, and thank her for her lifetime of dedication to raising this important issue? Will he also pay tribute to the Holocaust Educational Trust, which does everything possible to ensure we all remember and bear witness to the horrors of the worst part of the 20th century?

Mr Lidington: First, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. I would like to join him in marking the achievements of Kitty Hart-Moxon and the Holocaust Educational Trust. I can never forget the impact of discovering, as a schoolboy, that two of the boys in my class had fathers who survived Auschwitz. It is only a couple of generations ago that Europe was plunged into this unspeakable horror. It is important that not just the Holocaust Educational Trust but we all play our part in ensuring that the memory of the Holocaust lives on, and that the wider lessons of that dark period in our history are learned. I would be grateful for the support of all Members, right across the House from all political parties, in working together to ensure that that vital work continues.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Some of the most deprived communities in the country are in Glasgow, yet today we learn that apparently the Government plan to close jobcentres in those very communities, in Anniesland, Cambuslang and Maryhill. Is it true that the Government are planning to close these important jobcentres in those very communities, in Parkhead, Bridgeton, Easterhouse, Castlemilk, Langside, Anniesland, Cambuslang and Maryhill. Is it true that the Government are planning to close these important jobcentres in those very communities, in Parkhead, Bridgeton, Easterhouse, Castlemilk, Langside, Anniesland, Cambuslang and Maryhill. Is it true that the Government are planning to close these important jobcentres in those very communities, in Parkhead, Bridgeton, Easterhouse, Castlemilk, Langside, Anniesland, Cambuslang and Maryhill.

Mr Lidington: I am sorry but that is not good enough. [Interruption.] I am being heckled while standing up for deprived communities. That will ill behove Tory Members in Scotland.

The Leader of the House is correct that the Department has plans to cut the estate by 20%, but it is planning to cut it by 50% in Glasgow. Why are the Government planning disproportionately to cut vital jobcentres in some of the most deprived communities in our country?

Mr Lidington: The key element in any such decision that a Department has to make is not the raw number of offices there should be but how accessible the offices and the services they provide continue to be for the people who need to use them. I am absolutely confident that that criterion is at the heart of my right hon. Friend’s thinking in planning for the future of offices in Scotland and everywhere else in the United Kingdom.

Q4. [907703] Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Passengers on the Chase line face chaos and utter misery every autumn, and this year it has been worse than ever. Delayed, cancelled and overcrowded trains are leaving passengers stranded at stations and making them late for work and school. Will my right hon. Friend outline what measures the Government are taking to penalise poor-performing train operators?

Mr Lidington: I sympathise with my hon. Friend and her constituent, and all passengers who come across these problems on the Chase line. It is clearly unacceptable, and it is important that the operator works hard to secure a rapid and sustained improvement. The Government have introduced new rules to ensure that rail passengers will soon be able to claim compensation if their train is more than 15 minutes late, but as the Transport Secretary said yesterday, more needs to be done, and we want to see much closer working right across the railway industry, so that this kind of problem can be resolved much more swiftly.

Q6. [907705] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does the Leader of the House agree with the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) that Brexit offers an opportunity to remove pesky emissions standards? In the red, white and blue of Brexit, will his Government still commit to continued tough targets to protect our environment, or will tackling global warming become just a load of hot air?

Mr Lidington: The Government remain utterly committed to both national and global ambitions and targets on climate change. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, in her previous job, played a key role in brokering the Paris agreement last year—the first ever global agreement on climate change. I hope that the hon. Lady would welcome the fact that we are going to be ahead of our targets and ambitions in delivering on the proportion of electricity provided by renewables in this country and that we continue to work to get our carbon emissions down.

Q5. [907704] Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): There has been much talk recently about paying for access to a tariff-free single market. I think that that is a very good idea. Given that the UK is the fifth-biggest economy in the world and we have a £70 billion trade deficit with the EU, would the excellent acting Prime Minister tell the House how much the EU should pay for tariff-free access to the UK’s single market?

Mr Lidington: I thank my hon. Friend for the upgrade, but I hope that that does not turn out to be a career-limiting compliment. He makes a good point in that a settlement at the end of our negotiations that maintains maximum access to and freedom to operate within the European
market—for UK companies elsewhere in Europe and European companies here—is in our mutual interest. I hope that will inspire negotiators on both sides.

Q7. [907706] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): How does closing Maryhill jobcentre in my constituency, one of the most deprived parts of the country, help my constituents who want to find a job? Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that travelling further to other centres will mean increased costs for people already on the lowest incomes and an increased risk of sanctions? Why do the Government continue to target the poorest and most vulnerable in our society?

Mr Lidington: If the Government have been targeting the poorest and most vulnerable, it has been to get them back to work in record numbers and to provide a boost to the pay of people on low incomes through the introduction of and the increase in the national living wage. I wish the hon. Gentleman was prepared to welcome and celebrate those achievements.

Q8. [907707] Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): As we are about to commence the most important negotiation for decades, does my right hon. Friend agree that forcing the Government to disclose their negotiating strategy at this stage is rather like showing one's hand of cards to an opponent before a game of poker. I urge him to take no advice from the Labour party; it has only one card to play—and it is always the joker.

Mr Lidington: We have always said that we would come up with some more details about our strategic aims going into the negotiation, but it would harm our national interest if we were to go into the sort of detailed explanation of our negotiating position that the Opposition urge upon us. That is not how any of the other 27 Governments are either acting or thinking, and we should learn from that example.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Does the Leader of the House agree that tonight's vote on the Prime Minister's amendment, which we fully support, is a vote of the highest significance and greatest importance, because for the first time right hon. and hon. Members will have the opportunity to vote on whether they respect the will of the people of the United Kingdom and whether they will get on and implement it? People will be able to read in tomorrow's Hansard who stands by respecting the will of the people of the United Kingdom. Does he also agree—I am sure he will—that the more red, white and blue he makes it, the better for us on the Unionist Benches?

Mr Lidington: As so often, the right hon. Gentleman makes a powerful and important point. The vote tonight will be the first opportunity for Members to decide whether or not they support the Government's timetable for triggering article 50 by the end of March 2017. Any right hon. or hon. Member who votes against that motion will, in my view, be seeking to thwart the outcome of the referendum in the most profoundly undemocratic fashion.

Q9. [907708] Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): This country's nuclear deterrent is our ultimate defence, and it must be maintained at all costs, yet hundreds of my constituents who work at the Atomic Weapons Establishment are currently on strike or work to rule in a dispute over pensions. These are people who, more often than not, have devoted their entire working lives tending our nuclear defence and to whom promises were made during privatisation. Will the Leader of the House commit to sit down with the Prime Minister to review the situation to ensure that those promises are being kept?

Mr Lidington: I will certainly ensure that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is informed about this matter. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise these concerns on behalf of his constituents. My understanding is that the proposed changes to the Atomic Weapons Establishment pension scheme are a matter for the company as the employer, but I can assure my hon. Friend that my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary has been in close contact with AWE throughout the process and has also met the trade unions. He is now carefully considering recent developments to see what else might be done.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the whole House will join me in sending heartfelt sympathies and condolences to the family of David Brown, from Eston, who, aged just 18, took his own life. The inquest into his death has heard that he did so on the day he was due to sign on at the jobcentre, after saying that he felt “belittled” by staff despite actively looking for work and seeking an apprenticeship. Shortly before taking his own life, he told his mum:

"The way the Jobcentre treat people, it is no surprise people commit suicide."

Will the Leader of the House undertake to review that individual case? Will he also undertake to take stock of six years of brutal welfare reform, and look into the way the Department for Work and Pensions treats its most vulnerable constituents, particularly young people?

Mr Lidington: Let me first express my own unreserved sympathy for the family of David Brown. No parent, no family, should have to go through that kind of shocking experience.

Clearly, human beings in any organisation sometimes make decisions that get things wrong, and I will ask the Department for Work and Pensions to have a look at the particular case that the hon. Lady has described. However, I have to say to her that I think the principle remains right that, while staff should always behave with courtesy towards people seeking to claim benefits, it is also right for us to expect people who are receiving benefits to be subject to the kind of disciplines that apply to people in work even if they are on low pay. There is a principle of fairness here, which is what lies behind the approach that the DWP takes.

Q10. [907709] Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I applaud the Prime Minister's vision of a Government for all, but, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for communities engagement, I can tell the House that fewer than 4% of those on the boards of the companies in the FTSE 150 are from ethnic minorities. Will the Government support a vision of helping to increase that proportion to 10% by 2021?
Mr Lidington: It is clear that boardrooms should do more to reflect the reality of modern Britain. The Government certainly support the principle of increasing the diversity of boards, which is why we are supporting the business-led ethnic diversity initiative chaired by Sir John Parker. We strongly encourage businesses to act on Sir John’s recommendations.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): The response to a recent freedom of information request shows that Pinderfields hospital has diverted ambulances destined for its accident and emergency department to Dewsbury hospital, in my constituency, 61 times in the past 12 months. Dewsbury is scheduled for a downgrade next year. In the light of evidence showing that Pinderfields cannot currently cope, will the Leader of the House pledge urgent Government support to keep Dewsbury A&E open?

Mr Lidington: The NHS is certainly busier than it has ever been in its history, which is why it should be a matter of thanks and tribute to hard-working NHS staff that 90% of people going to A&E are still being seen within the four-hour target. The point about the configuration of local services in any part of the country is that they need to be driven by local clinicians through trusts working together with the clinical commissioning groups, who manage and understand what is needed in each locality. Local authorities, through their health committees, have the right to call in proposed changes in services and refer them to the Secretary of State if they are uncomfortable with them.

Q11. [907710] Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend will agree with me about the importance of the creative sector to our economy. That, in conjunction with the Welsh language, makes S4C, or Sianel Pedwar Cymru—which is currently based in my constituency—hugely important to the Welsh and British culture and economy. Will my right hon. Friend reaffirm the Government’s commitment to protecting the S4C budget while we review the future of the Welsh language broadcaster?

Mr Lidington: We are fully committed to the future of Welsh language broadcasting, and to S4C. I am pleased to say that the licence fee settlement that we have agreed has provided financial certainty, protecting S4C’s funding at more than £74 million a year for the next five years. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that the channel continues to make first-class shows and serve Welsh-speaking audiences in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and, for that matter, throughout the United Kingdom.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House aware of reports of Rohingyan children being massacred and thrown into fires, of Rohingyan women being raped and of houses being razed to the ground? What representations have the Government made to the Burmese authorities or the military in that regard?

Mr Lidington: Those reports from Rohingya are extremely concerning. As the hon. Lady knows, there is a long history of discrimination against the Rohingya people in Burma. British Ministers and the British embassy and officials in London make our concern very clear at regular intervals to the Burmese authorities.

Q12. [907711] Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Following the revelations in the BBC “Panorama” programme, Clinton House in my constituency is now closed. Three further care homes run by the Morleigh Group have now been rated as inadequate by the Care Quality Commission and two others are under inspection. Concerns have been raised about these care homes for many years, and it cannot be acceptable that it took the BBC to provoke the action that was desperately needed. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is now time to urgently review the role of the CQC to ensure that in future concerns raised by residents, families and staff are properly and promptly addressed?

Mr Lidington: Older and vulnerable people deserve the highest quality care possible. There is no excuse for services that fall short of expectations in the way my hon. Friend has described. The CQC has extensive powers in law to ensure that nobody in the chain of responsibility is immune to legal accountability, and I would expect the CQC to exercise those powers in full in this case. But my hon. Friend has made some criticisms of the CQC and the Government have been looking into ways to improve its processes and increase its efficiency. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), is the Minister responsible for community health and care, and he discussed this very issue with the CQC earlier today.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): US satellite data show that 6% of methane from fracking is leaked through fugitive emissions. Given that methane is 86 times worse than CO₂ for global warming over a 20-year timeframe, will the right hon. Gentleman support the Council of Europe’s call for the banning of fracking, or at least for a maximum of 0.1% fugitive emissions at the wellhead?

Mr Lidington: No, Mr Speaker. The Government took their decision to give a go-ahead to fracking after extensive consideration of both the economic and the environmental risks and opportunities involved. We are confident that fracking can be carried out in a way that is safe and does not harm the environment, but which also provides job opportunities for this country and makes us less dependent on the import of energy.

Q13. [907712] Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I expect my right hon. Friend will be astonished, if not aghast, to learn that a succession of journalists from the BBC have contacted me seeking to create—to manufacture—stories of Back-Bench rebellion on the issue of the EU. [Interruption.] Will he—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear about these activities.

Mr Baker: Does my right hon. Friend agree that on these controversial issues the BBC should stick to its charter obligations on accuracy and impartiality, instead of seeking to create problems for the Government?

Mr Lidington: I am sure that my hon. Friend is shocked at the thought that anybody should look to him as a source of information about rebellions against the Government. I hope he will be able to find some
comfort in the fact that the new royal charter and agreement require the BBC to deliver impartial news—the very first time impartiality has been enshrined in the BBC’s mission.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Having now received a response from the Prime Minister to my request for a children’s funeral fund, I was disturbed to be told that the social fund could provide a “simple and respectful funeral.” This answer is both insensitive and totally lacks any understanding of my original request. Has the Leader of the House the authority to facilitate a meeting with me and other bereaved mothers, so that we can explain to the Prime Minister exactly what we are asking for? This request is important to us as parents, many in this House and, judging from my postbag, many people and organisations across the country.

Mr Lidington: Burying a child must be an incredibly painful experience for any family, and I think we all pay respect to, and have enormous sympathy with, the hon. Lady. She says she speaks on behalf of thousands of parents who have had to go through that anguish. As the Prime Minister has said, there are mechanisms in place for making financial support available from central Government, and local authorities are of course free to waive funeral fees for child burials, and many of them do so. I will talk to my ministerial colleagues about the hon. Lady’s request for a meeting, and I am sure that she will receive a response to that.

Q14. Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Good train links are vital in enabling our constituents to get to work. It is therefore incredibly frustrating for my constituents that, of the 63 services a day that CrossCountry operates between Birmingham and Bristol, only three stop at the city of Gloucester on the way. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that when Ministers extend the train operator’s franchise, they do not allow CrossCountry to go on treating Gloucester like a leper to be avoided at all costs, and that they instead oblige the company to deliver the kind of service that every city deserves?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is as always speaking up strongly on behalf of his constituents. Any of us who have been to Gloucester will know that it is a place we want to be able to visit frequently and easily. The Government are investing record amounts in improving our railways and, in his particular case, Transport Ministers are working with CrossCountry and Great Western to see how the Gloucester service can be improved.

Mr Speaker: Order. We come now to the 10-minute rule motion, and I want to point out very gently—and, I hope, with proper courtesy—to the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) that 10 minutes is the maximum speaking time. There is another matter for debate today that is somewhat preoccupying the House, and there is no obligation on the hon. Gentleman to speak for the full 10 minutes if he does not feel inclined to do so. The House would be very sympathetic and understanding if he refrained. We will see.
Electoral Reform (Local Elections and Miscellaneous Provisions)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.42 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con):
I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill applying to England to provide for the introduction of first past the post elections of mayors, the London Assembly and Police and Crime Commissioners, to require elections for mayors, the London Assembly, Police and Crime Commissioners and local authorities to take place on the same day; to abolish the election of councillors by halves or thirds to local authorities; to allow a person to be a Member of the House of Commons and to hold any elected local government office, including that of Police and Crime Commissioner, at the same time; and for connected purposes.

The word “Parliament” has a range of meanings. It can be a collective noun: a parliament of owls is the term used to describe those very wise birds. It can also describe the very wise Members of this House, an institution of our constitutional monarchy—a court or council summoned by the monarch. We sit in the mother of all Parliaments, a place where the democratically elected people of this country come together to govern for the country. This is a place where the people’s voice must be heard.

The principle that all Members of this House are elected by their constituents is a fundamental principle in our United Kingdom. The link that binds a Member of Parliament to his or her constituency is one of the most important in politics. Every citizen of this country knows that they have one single consistent point of contact in this House to champion the issues that matter to them, to their families and to our country. But, unlike many things in our constitutional settlement, this link is not an accident. It is a product of our voting system to this House. It is the first-past-the-post system that gives our constituents the certainty of knowing who their representative in this House will be. That is widely understood by the people of this country.

In the 2011 referendum, first past the post was strongly supported by the British people by a margin of more than 2:1. Its greatest strength is that every person has one vote and the candidate who gets the most votes wins. It is quick and simple to count and does not unnecessarily burden the taxpayer with equipment and administration costs. The results are declared quickly, providing certainty during turbulent times. Most importantly, voters know that the candidate for whom they voted must be sure to deliver their objectives and stand by their manifesto and will face the test of the ballot box in five years’ time.

While many in this House appreciate the benefits of first past the post, that appreciation is sadly not replicated across our country. Some say that the effect of PR can be mitigated through, for example, the additional member system, but it does no such thing. While people may know their constituency Member, they are less likely, through no fault of their own, to contact their regional Members, so the latter have all the powers of their counterparts who were elected by first past the post but, having been appointed from a party list, have less accountability and connection to the people they represent. With systems such as alternative vote, one could even find that the person who wins actually ends up losing, which happens across the world from Irish presidential elections to elections to the Australian House of Representatives. Preferential voting means that people who should be elected are not.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Sri Lanka, I was surprised to find that a version of an electoral system invented by the Labour party is used for that country’s presidential elections. The supplementary vote system is also used for the election of police and crime commissioners and mayors across England. Once again, the candidate with less support in the first round can still end up winning. Take Lord Prescott, a candidate in the 2012 police and crime commissioner elections, he won the first round but was beaten in the second round. While I may be delighted that the Conservative candidate won, it was a day on which democracy was thwarted. The only purpose of that system is to give someone a second chance to steal votes from those who did not vote for them. In all, eight police and crime commissioners who should have been elected were not, including in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

Across England, we expect the very best. We want the best candidates, elected through the best system, to give us the best representation, but alternative systems of voting mean that some local areas have been stripped of their right to choose who is best. What is worse, the wishes of local people are being ignored, allowing candidates who lose to win. That will become ever more prevalent as more powers are devolved to local authorities and as more elected mayors are created through devolution. The public shall grow ever more dissatisfied with our political system. First past the post gives voters simplicity. It gives decisiveness. It gives voters constituency representation. Burke said:

“Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement”.

Each and every citizen has a right to know what judgment will represent them. If that is true for this place, why should we expect the public to accept second best in public offices across our land?

Similarly, we elect every Member of this House on one day, so why is it not the same for our local authorities? In this House, the Government are able to plan for the long term, acting in the best interests of the people for the long term. Local authorities that elect by thirds are often in a constant state of electioneering. Every May, new councillors come on board and have to settle into a new committee structure by July, before breaking up for August, working over the autumn months, only to be back in election mode in the new year. The best interests of the people are not served by that short-termism. If all local elections were held on a “super Thursday”, voters would know that their vote would make a difference, leading to greater engagement and public interest. Such a change would also save money. The estimated saving in one of my local authorities is some £57,000 in three years out of four. If we scale that up to the 120 authorities that do not have all-out elections, that is over £20 million over a four-year term. That would be not only a boon for local taxpayers, but a commitment to strong, stable local government, which would then be free to plan for the long term.

Democracy means that the people should decide who represents them. The former Member for Manchester Central was forced to stand down in 2012, even though
he had secured a strong mandate in 2010, to stand as a police and crime commissioner. Let us just think of the cost! By-elections can cost up to a quarter of a million pounds, so surely it should just be left up to the people to decide who is best placed to represent them at any level of government, at any given time. Surely we want the best mayors, the best PCCs, the best Assembly Members and the best councillors. The people should be able to have their say and their voice must be heard.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mr Ranil Jayawardena, Chris Evans, Jim Fitzpatrick, Robert Flello, David Mackintosh, Christian Matheson, Mr David Nuttall, Chris Philp, Robert Neill, John Penrose, Andrew Rosindell and John Stevenson present the Bill.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 January 2017, and to be printed (Bill 110).
Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress, if I may. The focus is now where it ought to be: on the substance, not the process. The terms upon which we leave the EU will define us and our country for many years, and this House and the public are entitled to know the approach the Government are intending to take.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con) rose—

Keir Starmer: I will make a bit of progress and get to dealing with the amendment.

Today’s victory is important, and so is the timing. As we debate this motion, the Government’s appeal is being heard in the Supreme Court. We need to remind ourselves that the Government are arguing that this House should have no say on the question of invoking article 50—that is the argument they are presenting in the Supreme Court; through that argument, they want to remove the prospect of a vote granted by the High Court a few weeks ago. That is the core of their argument and the purpose of their appeal: to remove that vote from us. That is what they are seeking to achieve, but that would be to avoid scrutiny and avoid accountability. If the Government succeed in that appeal, this motion will be very important, because it puts grip into a process that would otherwise have none. We will only have a plan to discuss because we will not be getting a vote.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): However, if the Government fail at the Supreme Court, there will have to be a legislative process. This is not a legislative process today, is it?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention and I am coming precisely to that point, so I will press on.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention and I am coming precisely to that point, so I will press on.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I do not want the shadow Secretary of State to inadvertently mislead the House. We already have legislation before this House—the Withdrawal from the European Union (Article 50) Bill—which has had its First Reading and will get its Second Reading on 16 December, unless someone objects.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention and understand the point, but let us see what happens on 16 December. The Secretary of State has made it clear on a number of occasions, understandably, that in addition to the main point of the appeal so far as the Government are concerned, which is to take away any right to vote on invoking article 50, there is a secondary intention, which is to get greater clarity on the type of legislation that may be needed in the new year. I anticipate that it is that Minister legislation that we will address before too long, but I do, of course, acknowledge the private Member’s Bill.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am glad that my hon. and learned Friend has made it clear that it is not our intention to frustrate the article 50 process, because the Government and their supporters have been putting it around that we are somehow trying to sabotage any decision on it.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention, because what we have seen is the characterising of anyone who questions the Government’s approach as frustration. That is the wrong characterisation and it is to be avoided. Having accepted today’s amendment, I hope that I will not be intervened on the whole time by Members saying that this is an attempt to frustrate. The plan needs to be produced in good time and with sufficient detail for us to debate it, but the purpose is not to frustrate the overall process or to delay the timetable that the Prime Minister set out some time ago.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): If the hon. and learned Gentleman accepts the Government’s amendment, is he not effectively giving unilateral support to whatever plan they decide to present, which means that Opposition Members will not be able to perform their parliamentary role of scrutinising the Executive?

Keir Starmer: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern, but that is not the case, and I will make that point in a moment.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that, if the Opposition support, or at least do not oppose, the Government’s amendment, it would be completely unacceptable and
totally inconsistent for them to do anything in the new year to delay the triggering of article 50 beyond 31 March?

Keir Starmer: I have made it absolutely clear that nothing in today’s motion precludes any party, including my own, from tabling an amendment to proposed legislation, if there is proposed legislation, and voting on it. I am astonished that some Members are willing to pass up the opportunity to have a vote in the first place and to restrict our ability to debate amendments.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): I do not want to break the hon. and learned Gentleman’s flow, but I want to make a factual point. Will he please answer the question that has just been put to him? Given that he supports the amendment, does he think it reasonable that some want to frustrate and slow down the article 50 process?

Keir Starmer: I have made it absolutely clear—and I will make it absolutely clear again—that the purpose of the motion calling for a plan is not to frustrate or delay the process. That is not why we are calling for a plan. This presents a challenge for the Government, because they now need to produce a plan in good time to allow the proper formalities and processes to be gone through. The timetable is more of a challenge for the Government than it is for the Opposition.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress. I have taken a lot of interventions.

The Government must now prepare their plan and publish it. I put the Government on notice that, if they fail to produce a plan by the time we debate proposed legislation on article 50—assuming that we do debate it and that the Government do not win their appeal—amendments will be tabled by the Opposition and, possibly, Government Members, setting out the minimum requirements of a plan. In other words, we are not going to have a situation where the Government seek a vote in a vacuum or produce a late, vague plan.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. and learned Gentleman, because he is playing on a very difficult wicket. The motion states “that there should be no disclosure of material that could be reasonably judged to damage the UK”.

Does he therefore believe that this plan should be a series of hints, an explanation of principle or specific priorities? It would be helpful to know what he means by a plan.

Keir Starmer: I think it is pretty straightforward and I have said this on a number of occasions. I fully accept that the Government will enter into confidential negotiations for a number of months and that producing a plan should not undermine that process. This is not the first time that I have said that; I have said it repeatedly. Some argue that we should not produce a plan because saying anything might undermine the negotiations, but I do not accept that. I do, however, accept that there is a level of detail and of confidential issues and tactics that should not be disclosed, and I have never said otherwise.

I want to put the contrary proposition, to see how comfortable Members really are with it. Absent of a plan and of our knowing the objectives and starting position, the Government would then negotiate for two years without telling us any of that detail. Are any Members of this House content not to know any of that between now and March 2019? Hands up who does not want to know that and is happy to say, “I don’t need to know. Whatever you are negotiating is fine by me.”

Mr David Davis: The hon. and learned Gentleman is an experienced lawyer, so I am sure that putting up Aunt Sallies is old hat to him. Given that he thinks that the alternative is telling the House nothing, I ask him what he thinks of these comments, which I have made eight times to this House:

“As I have said several times in debates that the hon. Gentleman has attended”—this was in response to the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown)—“I will make as much information public as possible without prejudicing our negotiating position.”—[Official Report, 20 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 952.]

Keir Starmer: I heard that point being made and I understand and respect the Secretary of State’s position on this issue and his history on issues of scrutiny and accountability. I also understand why he feels uncomfortable not disclosing the information that can be disclosed, but the motion moves the issue on and makes it clear that there will be a plan, while, of course, preserving that which needs to remain confidential.

I acknowledge that the Secretary of State made those comments and that he has said on more than one occasion that, when the Government have reached a judgment on the single market, the customs union, transitional measures and the like, because that is the direction of travel that I have understood him to be going in. The plan commits him to it and puts it in the framework of scrutiny and accountability that will come with proposed legislation on article 50, but I do acknowledge what he has said.

Mr David Davis: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for that acknowledgment, but let me pick up on the issues that he has raised. There may be circumstances in which the criteria and aims are clear, but the individual policy is not. There may be several options and it might be in our negotiating interests to keep more than one of them open. Surely that does not necessarily require that we specify in detail any individual line of pursuit.

Keir Starmer: I understand the Secretary of State’s point. To some extent, we will probably return to this debate as and when the plan materialises, but it is important there is no mischaracterisation. Asking for a plan setting out the objectives is not to seek to undermine the UK’s negotiating hand, nor is it to seek a running commentary. It is, in fact, to seek to have clarity, scrutiny and accountability.

Several hon. Members rose—
Keir Starmer: I am going to make progress.

The minimum requirements of a plan are fivefold. The first—I have begun to touch on this—is the need for enough detail and clarity to end the circus of uncertainty that has been going on in recent weeks on issues such as the single market, paying for access to the single market, the customs union and transitional arrangements. The pattern and rhythm of those exchanges over the past few days and weeks is clear for all to see. One member of the Cabinet says one thing one day; another member of the Cabinet says something else on a different day; then a spokesperson says that no decision has been made. We have seen that pattern over and over in the past few weeks. That uncertainty causes anxiety across the UK, in businesses, among working people, and in our nations and regions. It has to end, as it causes more damage to the process than anything else at the moment. The House, the public, businesses, working people, the media and our communities are entitled to know the basis on which the Government intend to negotiate their future.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. and learned Gentleman said that the alternative to having a plan was no information until 2019. Does he accept that in the debate on 12 October he asked the Secretary of State whether we would have the same information as the European Parliament, where there is a mandatory obligation to inform the European Parliament of the negotiations? My right hon. Friend said very clearly that the answer was yes.

Keir Starmer: Yes; good. We are working with our European colleagues on that issue, but that is after article 50 has been triggered. We are discussing what comes before. Of course, there are stages in the process. The plan is important because it is the start of the process: it sets the scene and the direction of travel. Once article 50 has been triggered, MEPs will be involved in the process, because they have a vote at the end of the exercise. I acknowledge that the Secretary of State has said on a number of occasions that whatever information they have, we will have. I should jolly well hope so. The idea that MEPs would be provided with more information about the negotiations than us would be wrong in the eyes of everyone in the House. The Secretary of State made that commitment early on, and it was the right commitment to make. He will not be surprised to learn that I intend to hold him to that every step of the way. I am sure that we will meet at the Dispatch Box to discuss precisely that.

Mr David Davis rose—

Keir Starmer: I have not finished dealing with the intervention from the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer). This is about what happens before the negotiations in the run-up to article 50. There will then be a two-year tunnel of negotiations. Then there is what happens at the end. MEPs will have a vote, and if they vote down the deal there will be no deal. I have no doubt that the Secretary of State will concede that we will have a vote in the House, because the idea of MEPs voting, but not the House, on the final deal is wrong in principle. He might be able to indicate now that there will be a vote at the end of the process on the deal, in the same way that MEPs will have a vote, as that would be helpful for this side of the House.

Mr David Davis: I apologise for intervening again, but we have said that procedures under the Constitutional Reform Act 2005 will apply. That is straightforward. I have said that at least three times to the House.

The hon. and learned Gentleman has asserted that there is no vote between whatever happens as a result of the court case and the ratification process. The great repeal Bill will be presented to the House during that two-year period, and after that there will be a series of consequential legislative measures, some primary, some secondary, and on every measure the House will have a vote and say.

Keir Starmer: I acknowledge that, but my response is exactly the same as my previous response. The timetable for the great repeal Bill applies after article 50 has been invoked, so that does not help us with the plan and the starting position. That is why this part of the process has to be gripped now, because what happens between now and 31 March really matters to the starting position. I accept that after that great repeal Bill will be introduced and debated, and no doubt there will be votes on its provisions, but essentially it is a Bill that indicates what will happen at the end of the process, rather than a Bill that deals with the plan—the starting position—or the process.

Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I understand why the shadow Minister is pressing the Government for their plans and I understand why he is setting out his red lines. I do not understand why he wants to enshrine that in legislation. The only reason for doing that is so that the Labour party can set up the Government to be sued later. Is that not the truth—will he come clean? It is wrecking tactics by any other name.

Keir Starmer: The answer to the question is no.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I am going to make progress—I have taken a lot of interventions.

The second requirement of a plan is that it must have enough detail to allow the relevant parliamentary bodies and Committees, including the Exiting the European Union Committee, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), to scrutinise the plan effectively. The Committee’s terms of reference include examining the Government’s objectives, so the plan must have sufficient detail to allow parliamentary bodies to conduct scrutiny effectively.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I am going to press on. Thirdly, the plan must provide enough detail to enable the Office for Budget Responsibility to do its job properly. As Members across the House know, the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011 sets out the role of the OBR: it is the duty of the OBR to examine and report on the sustainability of the public finances. Its charter states:
“The OBR’s published forecasts shall be based on all government decisions and all other circumstances that may have a material impact on the fiscal outlook.”

The Government are responsible for all policy decisions and policy costings, but it is for the OBR to provide independent scrutiny and certification of the Government’s policy costings. It states whether it agrees or disagrees with the Government’s costings, or whether it has been given insufficient time or information to reach a judgment. It is an important check and balance in the system on the spending of public money and on costings.

In its response to the autumn statement this year, the OBR made the following comment on assumptions about the cost of Brexit. In the foreword to the response, it said that it asked the Government for "a formal statement of Government policy as regards its desired trade regime and system of migration control, as a basis for our projections" on Brexit.

“The Government directed us to two public statements by the Prime Minister that it stated were relevant”.

The OBR was trying to do its job and obtain sufficient information to carry out its statutory functions, and has asked the Government for the relevant information. It has been directed to two public statements by the Prime Minister. In its report this year, the OBR said:

“Perhaps understandably, the Government’s response leaves us little the wiser as regards the choices and trade-offs that the Government might make during the negotiations”.

It is perhaps understandable in the early stages why that may be the case—I concede that, and this is not intended to be a cheap shot based on the OBR report—but it is important that the OBR should be able to do its job properly over the next two years or more. Unless it has sufficiently clear objectives, it cannot do so. It is wrong in principle for the OBR to be disabled from discharging its functions properly. There should be enough detail for that scrutiny to be carried out.

Fourthly, the plan must have enough detail to enable the relevant authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to be assured that their particular and specific concerns are addressed. Other Members will speak about those concerns far more authoritatively than I can, but they include concerns about the single market and, in Northern Ireland, concerns about the border and related issues. The detail must be sufficient for those authorities to be assured that their concerns are understood and are being addressed. Over the past few weeks, I have visited Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland to speak to the devolved Governments as well as to businesses, trade unions and the public in meetings. I can assure the House that “Brexit means Brexit” does not come close to answering the concerns I heard or to addressing the huge, complex challenges that Brexit will pose across the UK.

Fifthly, the plan must have enough detail to build genuine consensus. That is an important point, because the future of this country is bound up with the negotiations, and it is wrong in principle for the Government to act solely for the 52%—to base its approach on the 52% or a group within the 52%. The vote on 23 June was not a vote to write those that voted to remain out of their own history. They have a right and an interest in these negotiations and they have a right to have a Government who give weight to their interests as well as the interests of the 52%. I have said this before and I will say it again: the Government must act not for the 52% or the 48% but for the 100%, acting in the national interest. That can be achieved only if we have a national consensus.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I am fascinated by the focus on the plan and the amount of work that the hon. and learned Gentleman will invite the OBR to do. He does understand, surely, that no plan survives engagement with the enemy. [Interruption.] That is a military metaphor from assaults. Our negotiating hand is clear, and it is clear that it is not compatible with the position taken by our 27 partners. This will all change in the course of the negotiations, and we will have to leave it to the Government to make those decisions.

Mr Speaker: Order. I recognise that the hon. Gentleman is an illustrious Member of the House as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, but even so the intervention was too long.

Keir Starmer: On reflection, the hon. Gentleman may think that he did not use the right word in describing our partners as “the enemy”.

That brings me to a footnote, but an important footnote. Some of the language and tone that has been adopted by the Government and their Front Bench is not helping the prospects for a good outcome. [Interruption.] I hear the comment that that is disingenuous. I have been to Brussels. I have spoken on a number of occasions to those who will be involved in the exit, and they are not particularly amused by jokes about Prosecco; they are not particularly interested or amused by references to “cake and eat it”. They want a professional, constructive set of negotiations, and some of the comments that are being made about them and their real purposes are not helping the prospect. We have a shared interest across this House in getting these very difficult negotiations off to the best possible start, and comments along the way that are unhelpful or disparaging of our EU partners are simply not helping.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I will press on.

Until now, the Prime Minister’s two mantras that “Brexit means Brexit” and that there will be “no running commentary” on negotiations tell us nothing about the type of Brexit that the Government propose. I am not sure that the recently coined “red, white and blue” Brexit takes us any further forward. The question that everybody wants answered is, will it be the hard Brexit suggested in the Prime Minister’s party conference speech, or the vaguer form suggested by Cabinet Ministers when they speak of possible payments into the EU budget and provide welcome guarantees to Nissan about the prospect of arrangements that are free of tariffs or bureaucratic impediments? These are two different versions of our future that will be negotiated over the next few years, and we need to know which version we are running with, and we need a consensus.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. and learned Friend is right to insist on a plan. It is important that we do not stand in the way of the will of
the British people in the referendum, but does he accept that there are many people in all parts of the House who have some doubts and misgivings about the timing of the invoking of article 50? Many people think that 31 March is simply too soon—that we are rushing into it—and that as we will not start negotiations until after the German elections, we may get only a year of negotiations. Does my hon. and learned Friend accept that there is risk in that timetable?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. I do understand the concerns about the timetable and I think they are shared across the House. It is a tight timetable. I accept that the purpose of the plan, or the motion, is not to frustrate or delay the process. I know that the Secretary of State equally wants to keep to that timetable, but it is an exacting timetable and it is incumbent on the Government to make sure that the deadline is met by ensuring that the plan is available as soon as possible in January 2017.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I shall press on, if I may. The question on everybody’s lips is, is it the hard Brexit sketched out at the party conference, which was read by those in Brussels as meaning outside the single market, outside the customs union and an arm’s length relationship with our EU partners, or is it a more co-operative, collaborative approach with our partners? I understand, and I can hear from the statements, that there is disagreed on the other party Benches about this, but we cannot go into the negotiations with that disagreement still raging. We need to go in with consensus. I will say this loud and clear: there is no mandate for hard Brexit; there is no consensus for hard Brexit.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: No. I have given way a number of times. In the past few months I have travelled across the UK to hold meetings with a wide range of interested parties, such as businesses large and small, different nations and regions, trade unions, working people and local communities on the question of the terms on which the UK should exit the EU. I know that the Secretary of State and his team have been engaged in the same exercise. We have been to some of the same places and regions and spoken to some of the same people. The overwhelming evidence is that they do not want hard Brexit. There is not a consensus out there for hard Brexit. If we are to reach a consensus, it must be genuine consensus that works for everybody.

The ball is now in the Government’s court to produce a timely plan that meets these requirements. That will be the start of scrutiny and accountability, not the end. If the Government fail to produce a timely and sufficiently detailed plan, they should expect further challenge from the Opposition, and I put the Secretary of State on notice that that is what we will do. Only legislation, not today’s motion, can allow the Prime Minister to trigger article 50. That will have to be debated and subject to the full and proper procedures in this House, as the Secretary of State accepts. The motion makes it clear that although Labour will not frustrate the article 50 process, it does intend to shape the debate and head off hard Brexit.

1.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): I beg to move an amendment, at end add: “... consistently with the principles agreed without division by this House on 12 October; recognises that this House should respect the wishes of the United Kingdom as expressed in the referendum on 23 June; and further calls on the Government to invoke Article 50 by 31 March 2017.”

Before I speak to the amendment, let me make a few factual remarks to the Labour spokesman, the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). He ended by saying that there is no mandate for hard Brexit. To be honest, I do not know what hard Brexit means. The mandate was to leave the European Union. We should keep that in mind. He quite properly raised the issue of Northern Ireland. It is simply because I am standing at the Dispatch Box today that I am not chairing a joint ministerial committee of the devolved Administrations on exactly these issues. There has been considerable progress on that; I can brief him on that, if he does not know about it. Some of it, almost by definition, is confidential. He should take it as read that the process has been going on for some time and is quite well advanced.

The hon. and learned Gentleman raised the issue of the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011. He may remember that I was a Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, and I am reasonably familiar with National Audit Office and OBR operations. The condition that applies to any information that we put in the public domain—that it will not bias or undermine the negotiation—applies equally here; if we were to give information to the OBR, there would be the same telegraphing of what we are doing. It would be very inappropriate for another reason as well. This is a negotiation, not a policy statement, so where we are aiming for—I think we may be on the same page on this—may not be the exact place we end up, and I think he would understand that.

Keir Starmer: To be clear, I was not making the argument that the OBR required confidential information, the disclosure of which would undermine negotiations; my point was simply that the plan must be sufficiently detailed to let the OBR do its job in a way that lets it provide the scrutiny it is supposed to.

Mr Davis: I take that point. As I make progress through what I have to say, I will explain why, in some respects, that is not practical.

This debate is very similar to the last Opposition day debate Labour chose to have on Brexit, and it really is the last clause of the motion that extends beyond that. The Government and I certainly can accept the motion with the amendment that whatever plan we set out is consistent “with the principles agreed without division by this House on 12 October”, and that the House...
recognises that this House should respect the wishes of the United Kingdom as expressed in the referendum on 23 June; and further calls on the Government to invoke Article 50 by 31 March 2017.”

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: No, I am going to make a bit of progress. I will give way later. I normally like the badinage with the Opposition, but I have to make some progress on quite an important argument.

Dance on a pin as the shadow spokesman may, that is what the Opposition are signing up to: the Government invoking article 50 by 31 March 2017. Let us be clear about that. It has always been our intention, as I said in my intervention on him, to lay out the strategy in more detail when possible, provided it does not undermine the UK’s negotiating position.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Davis: If my right hon. and learned Friend will wait a little while, I will, of course, give way to him.

In fact, I have said that categorically in front of this House and the other House on a number of occasions, including just last week, and I am happy to confirm it again today. Our amendment also lays out an important challenge to those on the Benches opposite who say that they respect the result of the referendum, but whose actions suggest that they are looking for every opportunity to thwart and delay this. We will see today if they are willing to back the Government in getting on with implementing the decision made by the people of the United Kingdom. However, before I address the motion in terms, I will give way to my right hon. and learned Friend.

Mr Grieve: May I emphasise to my right hon. Friend that the motion must require Parliament to support the triggering of article 50 by means known to the law? He will doubtless agree that, as the law stands, that requires primary legislation. While it is possible for private Members’ Bills to be introduced, in reality it will be the Government’s duty to introduce legislation if they wish to proceed, and to do that in a timely fashion that enables proper debate on it.

Mr Davis: My right hon. and learned Friend, the ex-Attorney General, should know better than to tempt me to comment on a court case that is taking place as we stand here, so I will not do that, but as he well knows, we will obey the rule of law; we will obey what the Court finds. We will ensure that we do the right thing. As the spokesman for the Opposition said, one of the reasons we are waiting on the outcome is to get precisely right what it is this House has to do.

Geraint Davies: On the timing set out in the amendment, does the Secretary of State not accept that, given that the French election is in May and the German election is in October, nothing will be achieved in that timeframe? If we trigger in March, there will be negotiating time lost in the two-year window. Article 50 should therefore be triggered in the autumn, in November, with time for a referendum on the exit package, so that people can decide on the final deal.

Mr Davis: No, I do not accept that. Between now and the possible end of the negotiating process, it goes the full distance, there are 15 elections, and of course we have already had two events this weekend: a referendum and another election. There is no point in the period when there is no election under way, so it is simply not possible to meet the hon. Gentleman’s requirement.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Is the crucial issue here not that, whatever the caveats entered by the shadow Minister, anyone voting for this amendment tonight will find it impossible to justify to the public any reneging, any going back or any procrastination—anything after 31 March that seeks to delay the triggering of article 50? That is the reality of the situation.

Mr Davis: The right hon. Gentleman is exactly right. I agree with him entirely.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con) rose—

Mr Davis: To balance up affairs, I will give way to the Father of the House.

Mr Clarke: Quite apart from the legalities of the situation, we have to address the political question of the Government’s accountability to this House for their important policies. This word “plan” is being used in an extremely vague way, and could cover some of the vague assertions that Ministers have been making for the last few weeks. Will the Secretary of State accept that the House requires a description—published in a White Paper, preferably—of the strategic objectives that the Government will pursue and that the Government should submit that strategy to a vote of the House? Once it has the House’s approval, they can move to invoke article 50.

Mr Davis: My right hon. and learned Friend is at least straightforward in what he says; he does not really agree with the outcome of the referendum. My view on this—I agree with him to some extent—is very clear. He has said that the word “plan” is vague; I think that what I have said already to this House, in terms of giving all possible information, subject to it not undermining negotiations, is actually more comprehensive. But it is not that we are not going to allow the House votes. First, we cannot do that as a Government, even if we wanted to. Secondly, as I have said, there will be a considerable amount of legislation during the negotiation, which will, in some respects, confine us.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Davis: I will make some more progress, if I may. [Interruption.] I will not give in to my normal temptations today. [Hon. Members: “Go on!”] No, no.

Chris Bryant rose—

Mr Davis: Mr Speaker, I am going to make about five minutes’ progress. I hope the hon. Gentleman does not mind. [Interruption.]
Mr Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State is clearly not giving way at present—a point that is so blindingly obvious that only an extraordinarily clever person could fail to grasp it.

Mr Davis: You make my point, Mr Speaker.

It is widely accepted that the negotiation of our departure from the European Union is the most important and most complex negotiation in modern times, and it is overwhelmingly important that we get it right; I think that is common ground. It is normal even for basic trade negotiations to be carried out with a degree of secrecy. Indeed, the European Commission recognises this in its own approach to transparency in such negotiations, in which it says:

“A certain level of confidentiality is necessary to protect EU interests and to keep chances for a satisfactory outcome high. When entering into a game, no-one starts by revealing his entire strategy to his counterpart from the outset: this is also the case for the EU.”

The reason for this is to retain room for manoeuvre, including the ability to give and take, to trade off different interests, to maximise the value of concessions, and to do so without always giving the other side advance notice. We must retain the ability to negotiate with a high degree of agility and speed; the more complex the negotiation, the more parties to it, and the more time-pressured it is, the more important that is.

Any trade negotiation—and this is more than a trade negotiation—is difficult and complex. This negotiation will be another step up beyond that, for a number of reasons. First, it is about more than just trade. While that is an incredibly important part of it, our new relationship with the EU will also encompass our continued co-operation in areas such as security, justice and home affairs. Secondly, it is not merely a bilateral negotiation, but one involving about 30 different parties with a number of different interests. Thirdly, while considering our exit, Europe must also consider its own future. We have been clear that we want a stable and secure European Union—a vital partner for the UK at a time of very serious global challenges. Finally, the political scene in Europe is not set, but is changing—the point I was making. During the period of our negotiations, there are at least 15 elections and other political events that could change the backdrop to our exit process. The combination of these factors and their interplay will mean a changing climate for what are already complicated talks.

Sir Edward Leigh: Will my right hon. Friend allow me to intervene?

Mr Davis: In a moment.

We will need to find a way through a vast number of competing interests to manage our exit from the Union, so that our people benefit from it—that is the aim of this exercise: for our people to benefit from it.

To do that, the Government must have the flexibility to adjust during negotiations. It is like threading the eye of a needle: if you have a good eye and a steady hand, it is easy enough, but if somebody jogs your elbow, it is harder. If 650 people jog your elbow, it is very much harder.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State has just read out a list of reasons not to disclose the Government’s plan and negotiating objectives, but the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) called—rightly in my view—for a White Paper on the Government’s intentions. If the Secretary of State does not agree with him, will he at least agree with himself, because he called for the same thing before he was appointed to the job? Why was a White Paper the right thing to do in July, but not now?

Mr Davis: I really ought to make the people who raise this point, which has been made about five times in this House, read out what I actually said, which was that this is one negotiating option among several. The right hon. Gentleman says that I have just been giving reasons for not outlining negotiating objectives, but that is not true—I will come back to why in a minute. There is a reason not to lay out in detail some of the trade-offs and some of the options that we do have to keep to ourselves until we are in the negotiating chamber. I make this point more generally to the House. During the course of the Amsterdam treaty, we had difficult negotiations to carry out, and I kept the House up to date with every bit of that, but that was done at the right time—the appropriate time—and not when it undermined the national interest, which is the problem here.

Sir Edward Leigh: Does my right hon. Friend accept that one can be an honest Brexiteer who wants to get this through, while still wanting to proclaim parliamentary sovereignty? That is a perfectly logical point of view. I happen to agree that we want to get article 50 through without any wrecking amendments that unduly tie the Government’s hands, but can he give a commitment that in addition to votes on the great repeal Bill, when we have a final deal, the matter will come to this House for ratification?

Mr Davis: In fact there is a law that applies to this—the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010—so we are, in effect, bound by that.

Keir Starmer: This is important, so can the Secretary of State say in terms that there will be a vote on the final deal in this House? I understand what he says about the underpinning statutes, but can he say simply, for the record, that there will be a vote on the final deal in this House?

Mr Davis: All I can say is what I have said before: that is what I expect. It is as simple as that.

I want to pick up on the point about parliamentary scrutiny in a little more depth, if I may—

Chris Bryant: The 2010 Act says that a Government cannot ratify a treaty until such time as they have laid the treaty before the House and 21 sitting days have passed. It does not guarantee a vote. In fact, since 2010 the Government have on several occasions refused to allow a vote on treaties even when they have been asked for by the Opposition. Is the Secretary of State now specifically saying that the Government will guarantee a vote at such a point?
Mr Davis: As I was about to say—I was in the middle of a sentence—it is inconceivable to me that if the European Parliament has a vote, this House does not. It is as simple as that.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend clarify the point that any vote in this House at the end of the process would merely be on the deal and could not reverse the fact that we had left the European Union.

Mr Davis: That is entirely correct.

Sir Gerald Howarth: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Davis: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will make a bit more progress for a few moments and keep him in mind.

All this does not mean that parliamentary scrutiny is not very important—of course it is. I, of all people, would be last to argue that. That is why I have already given three oral statements to this House and answered more than 350 parliamentary questions. It is why Ministers from my Department and I have already appeared before Select Committees on 10 occasions—I will be appearing in front of the Brexit Committee in a week. It is why the Government announced a series of themed debates, with workers’ rights and transport already discussed, and another debate coming up before Christmas. There have also been more than 15 debates about this in the other House.

However, there is no doubt that the way in which we handle and disclose information is important to the negotiating process. Needless to say, I have given a great deal of thought to how we achieve accountability at the same time as preserving the national interest. That was why at the first parliamentary Committee hearing I appeared before—I think it was the House of Lords Select Committee—I volunteered an undertaking that British parliamentarians would be at least as well served, in terms of information, as the European Parliament. As I said to the Opposition spokesman, I have said on several other occasions that we will provide as much information as possible—subject, again, to that not undermining the national interest. This is a substantive undertaking, but it must be done in a way that will not compromise the negotiation.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Secretary of State repeats that what he is doing is—he thinks—in the national interest, but he must have heard from industrialists, as Labour Members have, that the uncertainty and lack of clarity from Ministers means that people are putting back projects and not investing. That is why the growth rate is down and the public finances are in such a mess.

Mr Davis: We heard during the campaign about how the economy was going to collapse, but I seem to have noticed in the past few months that really it is doing very well indeed, thank you very much. This nay-saying—this talking down the country—is, frankly, the least desirable part of the Opposition’s behaviour.

Sir Gerald Howarth: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Davis: Yes, as I promised to do so.

Sir Gerald Howarth: May I say how strongly I support my right hon. Friend? My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who is of course a very great national treasure, called for us to set out our strategic vision, but surely this Government have set out that strategic vision with great clarity: we want to recover control of our borders, make our own laws, keep our own money, engage in free trade, and leave the European Union. What could be more strategic than that?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is, of course, exactly right, and that brings me rather neatly to the next thing I want to say.

Opposition Members have tried to pretend that we have told them nothing, but that simply demonstrates the old adage that none are so deaf as those who will not hear. We have also been clear that we will set out more as we approach the negotiations.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) rose—

Mr Davis: I will give way in a moment.

As the Prime Minister said in October, although we will not be giving a running commentary—Opposition Members love that phrase—we will give clarity whenever possible and as quickly as possible. As she told the House earlier this month,

“Our plan is to deliver control of the movement of people from the European Union into the United Kingdom.”—[Official Report, 16 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 230.]

That was the first point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth). I have also been clear about what this involves. Free movement of people cannot continue as it is now, but this will not mean pulling up the drawbridge. We will operate the immigration system in our national interest, with a view to winning the global battle for talent. Labour Members do not like this, partly because they cannot agree on their own policy. In the past few weeks, we have heard at least three different positions on the future of free movement from shadow Front Benchers.—[Interruption.]

The Opposition spokesman probably thinks there are more, as he is challenging me. It is therefore no surprise that they do not want to talk about it, but this is an important, substantive decision that reflects the will of the British people.

Similarly, the Prime Minister has said that we intend to remove the UK from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. That is part of the promise to recover control of our own laws. Some Labour Members do not like this because they suggest that the ECJ is the principal guarantor of basic British rights and freedoms. I have to say that that shows an astonishing lack of knowledge of our own history, in which British people fought to create and preserve those freedoms. I suppose it is unsurprising that the party that attempted to impose on Britain the most draconian piece of law in modern times—90 days’ detention without charge—has little understanding of the proper origins of freedom and the rule of law.

Mr MacNeil: As part of our determination to find out some knowledge from Ministers, it was asked several times at today’s Prime Minister’s questions whether the
UK would want to be in the customs union or not. Can the Secretary of State for Brexit let us know what his policy is? Can he give us something substantive? Is it a case of in the customs union or not in the customs union, because this was not on the ballot paper? The people did not vote to leave the customs union.

Mr Davis: What was on the ballot paper, and what I think a million Scots voted for, was leaving the European Union. I will come back, do not worry. I am not going to sidestep the question; I never do.

The simple truth is that, as the Prime Minister said—I am a Minister of the Government, remember—this is not a binary option. There are about four different possibilities, and we are still assessing them. I have given an undertaking to the Opposition spokesman that I will notify the House in detail when we come to that decision.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab) rose—

Mr Davis: I will make some progress and then I will give way again in a moment. There are some among the Labour party who think that leaving the jurisdiction of the ECJ will undermine employment law. Again, that shows a sorry ignorance—employment protection in the UK does not derive principally from the ECJ.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Davis: No.

Nevertheless, to prevent any misrepresentation or misunderstanding, the Government have announced that they will not erode employment protections, so there can be no doubt about the situation. Labour talks about employment rights, but the Government have made clear guarantees and are bringing forward the great repeal Bill to ensure that the rights that are currently enjoyed are maintained.

Anna Soubry: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Hon. Members: Give way!

Mr Davis: Clearly somebody has the support of the Labour party for what she wants to say. I will get around to my right hon. Friend in a minute.

We have been clear that the great repeal Bill will transpose all EU law into UK law, wherever practical.

Anna Soubry rose—

Mr Davis: I will not give way for a second, because this point is incredibly important. No law will be changed without the explicit approval of Parliament. That is the key point to understand in this debate.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. On the customs union matter, did I hear him correctly? Is he saying that the Government will decide whether we will remain in it or out of it, and that then the House, or rather the Opposition, will be told what the Government’s decision is, but we in this place will have no say in it?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend was not listening; she probably made up her question before she heard the last paragraph. I said that there would be no law changed in this country without the approval of the House of Commons.

Let me come back to the issue of customs union, since it is important. There are several options on customs union. One is shown by Norway, which is in the single market but not in the customs union. One is shown by Switzerland, which is neither in the customs union nor in the single market, but has a customs agreement. A whole series of options exists, and we will come back to the House about that when we are ready.

On my right hon. Friend’s other point, she should understand that because I gave the undertaking to the Opposition spokesman, it was somehow to the Opposition, not the House of Commons. Any undertaking made from this Dispatch Box is to the whole House of Commons, and she should understand that.

A further area in which our aims have been made very clear is justice and home affairs. As I said in the House last week, our aim is to preserve the current relationship as best we can, consistent with our broader aims. That clearly extends to areas such as security and law enforcement. Even after we leave the EU, the UK and the EU will face common threats, from terrorism to organised crime. As such, I believe that there is a clear mutual interest in continued co-operation in these areas. The security of Europe will remain of paramount importance to us, meaning that we will continue to co-operate as we do now with our European partners to help to maintain it.

As for the area that has dominated the debate so far—trade and the European market—the Government have been as clear as is sensible at this stage. We have said that we seek the freest possible trading arrangements, in respect of both tariffs and non-tariff barriers. The Government’s view is that the best deal is most likely to be achieved by a negotiated outcome.

Emma Reynolds rose—

Mr Davis: One moment. There is a range of means of arriving at a deal and there is a range of outcomes, and it does not make sense to box ourselves in. I am a believer in free trade, and I want to see the freest trade possible with the European Union and also with the rest of the world. We will be a global and outward-looking nation and a leading advocate for free trade. We want to be able to embrace the opportunities of Brexit—I know that the shadow Chancellor agrees with that, although it apparently makes my opposite number “furious”—but we want to maintain the best relationship possible with the European Union.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: Not at the moment. We have made our aims clear on immigration, on the ECJ, on workers’ rights and, in fact, on European Union legislation more broadly. We have clear aims on justice and home affairs,
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on security and, finally, on trade. It is important that the House understands what we are aiming for, but it is also important that we do not close off options before we absolutely have to. Just this weekend the leader of the Opposition suggested that he would seek to tie the hands of the Government regarding certain outcomes, such as a particular status in terms of the European market. To do so would seriously undermine the national interest, because it would undermine our ability to negotiate freely.

As I said at my first appearance at the Dispatch Box in this role, Parliament will be regularly updated and engaged. Keeping in mind those strategic aims and the fact that to reveal our position in detail or prejudice the negotiations cannot be in the national interest, we will set out our strategic plans ahead of the triggering of article 50. It is well documented that when we have decided to trigger article 50, the Government will notify the European Council. As I have said on several occasions, the House was always going to be informed in advance of the process. We are happy to support the spirit of today’s motion, with the vital caveat that nothing we say should jeopardise our negotiating position.

The Government amendment underlines the timetable for our departure, affirming the Prime Minister’s intention to notify by 31 March. Many Opposition Members pay lip service to respecting the result of the referendum, while at the same time trying to find new ways to thwart and delay. The shadow Cabinet cannot even decide whether it respects the will of the people. We are well aware of the desire of my opposite number to keep his “options open” with regard to a second referendum—the most destructive thing we could do for our negotiating position.

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Keir Starmer: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: No.

Today we will see whether the Opposition are prepared to back Britain and support our plan to follow the instruction of the British people and leave the European Union. The Government are absolutely determined to honour the decision made by the British people on 23 June.

1.56 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his speech and for giving us the opportunity to debate this subject today. As we have said, we are keen to continue to work with him and his colleagues, and indeed with Members from across the House, where that is possible. We appreciate the remarks that he made about devolved Administrations, but, given where we are and given the Government’s comments, that is not enough for us, and neither is what has been set out.

It is 167 days—almost six months—since the referendum. We have 113 days to go until the 31 March deadline that the Government have set themselves, so we are almost two thirds of the way there. To talk about a glacial pace of progress might be something of an overstatement. So far, the Government have told us nothing. We have been told about soft Brexit, hard Brexit, grey Brexit, and, earlier today, a red, white and blue Brexit. Perhaps we will be getting a continental Brexit, to keep our European partners on side, or even a deep-fried Brexit. We are not entirely sure. Given the timetable, it will not be a Christmassy Brexit for whoever is trying to plug the gaps in the Government’s plans.

There has been an impact, and a significant number of questions remain unanswered. They are not just questions that float out there; they go to the very heart of the Government’s negotiating position. What exactly are the Government telling their negotiating partners, if anything? Are the Government telling them that the single market is important and that we need to maintain membership of it? Have the Government listened to their Scottish leader, who said of the single market that “the over-riding priority is to retain access to it”?

Do the Government agree with her on that? What about the rights of EU nationals? European nationals call this country their home. They call Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland their home, and I hope that they will continue to do so. What a huge contribution they have made and continue to make. They deserve better than this continued uncertainty.

We all benefit from freedom of movement, and I hope that we will all continue to benefit from it. A large number of our industries also benefit from it, not least the food and drink industry. Scotland has suffered over the years from emigration; we have benefited more than most from freedom of movement, as I know the Secretary of State is well aware. We want to keep it. It benefits us and it will continue to benefit us. It benefits us not only financially but culturally, by enriching our communities and bringing in the people who enrich our society.

Mr David Davis: The hon. Gentleman and I do not differ on many of these points, but allowing people access to any part of the United Kingdom, and access to work in particular, is not achieved only by an absolute rule on freedom of movement. Control of our borders by our Government would presumably be operated in the UK national interest. Why does he expect that to punish Scotland? It would not do so.

Stephen Gethins: The Secretary of State makes the point. Why not give Scotland—it needs the powers—some of the responsibility for immigration?

On that very point, the Vote Leave campaign, of which the Secretary of State was a member—a full and active member—did not promise much. It is good to see that the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) is in his place, for was it not he who said that Scotland could have control over immigration if we voted to leave the European Union? I would be delighted to hear about their plans when the Under-Secretary winds up.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con) indicated assent.

Stephen Gethins: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman is nodding still, and I look forward to his joining us in the Lobby at some point. He can come home to his roots, and we will welcome him on this issue.

Let us not forget the impact this is having elsewhere in the United Kingdom. On jobs and the economy, Nissan has been given reassurances, but what about other industries? What about the food and drink industry? What about our fishermen and farmers, a lot of whose rules and regulations come from the European Union?
What will happen to the common agricultural policy, or to the coastal communities fund, which is so important to our fishing communities? [Interruption.] What happens, as the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) points out from a sedentary position, about Horizon 2020? What will happen to universities, which particularly benefit from freedom of movement? What will happen to workers’ rights, which will come back to this House, which has not always been the best place to guarantee those rights in the past? What will happen to the environment, which has also benefited from Europe?

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions workers’ rights. First, the Government have already confirmed that we will maintain what exists; and secondly, in many areas UK law exceeds the EU minimum.

Stephen Gethins: In many other areas, such as parental and other rights, we relied on European Union rulings. I tell the hon. Gentleman right now that I would trust the European Union a lot more than I trust this Government when it comes to workers’ rights and other rights.

We need more details. Mario Draghi, the president of the European Central Bank, has said:

“it is important to have clarity over the negotiation process as soon as possible in order to reduce uncertainty”.

The Secretary of State’s speech has not reduced that uncertainty in the slightest.

The Secretary of State made the point that no law will be changed without the say of Parliament, so let me ask him a question. He is in the Chamber, but not in his place, although his colleague the Under-Secretary is on the Front Bench. Will no law that is a responsibility of the Scottish Parliament be changed without the say-so and consent of that Parliament? That is critical, because the motion fails to take on board the impact of devolved Administrations, and a huge array of the questions lie unanswered about matters that are the direct responsibility of not just Edinburgh, but of Belfast and Cardiff.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): My hon. Friend—he is not yet a Minister, but let’s give him his notepad ready so that he can respond to it. We were told by the Secretary of State for Scotland just on 27 November that Scotland would be gaining “significant powers”. Will the Under-Secretary outline what those significant powers are and, to come back to the point I made earlier, whether they will include powers over immigration among others?

Stephen Gethins: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

I have another point—I hope the Under-Secretary has his notepad ready so that he can respond to it. We were told by the Secretary of State for Scotland just on 27 November that Scotland would be gaining “significant powers”. Will the Under-Secretary outline what those significant powers are and, to come back to the point I made earlier, whether they will include powers over immigration among others?

Scotlaand is a European Nation, and we are proud to be a European nation. We benefit, as we see every day in our interactions with the food and drink industry, universities, businesses and the financial sector among many other sectors. The EU benefits us in many different ways—financially, socially and even politically, because there are so many areas, such as energy and climate change, on which we agree so much more with the European consensus than we do with the Westminster consensus.

The relationship with the European Union is important and will be important in the future, but for the record it is important for us to bear it in mind that Scotland has always been a European nation. In the town of St Andrews in my constituency, there stands a statue of General Sikorski, who led the free Polish troops. We remember the sacrifice that they made, and the contribution that the Polish community has made to Scotland and to other parts of the United Kingdom. I remember the interaction between universities in Scotland and those across Europe for hundreds of years, such as the interaction between Scottish universities and those in the Netherlands and elsewhere. I also remember the Lübeck letter: just after the battle of Stirling Bridge—we are going back a bit—the first thing that William Wallace did was to tell the Hanseatic League that Scotland was open for business again. This relationship goes back a long time, and the lack of preparations for Brexit is irresponsible.

There is the Court case across the road today. I do not want to go into it too much, but the Scottish Lord Advocate will be making the arguments for the Scottish Government, and he will do so much better than I possibly could. However, I do not understand why the Government are scared of parliamentary scrutiny. What concerns them about trying to undertake what is, as the Secretary of State himself conceded, an enormous undertaking? Is it not the case that the Government governs, or so the theory goes, and that the legislature scrutinises its work—never has that been more important—while, despite what some people have said, the judiciary does not decide the laws, but carries out the task of assessing whether the rules are being adhered to? All of us in the Chamber must respect that. Similarly, it is for the devolved Administrations to have a say over areas under their responsibility.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): In the case currently going through the Supreme Court, the Lord Advocate for Scotland described the Sewell convention yesterday as “a political restriction upon Parliament’s ability to act, no more and no less than that”.

However, has not that convention been put on a statutory footing as part of the Scotland Act 2016? Is my hon. Friend as concerned as I am about the lack of clarity from Brexit Ministers on that point?

Stephen Gethins: The Minister makes—[Interruption.] My hon. Friend—he is not yet a Minister, but let’s give it time—makes an excellent point. There is chaos, pure and simple. The chaos is the fault not of the judges but of the Government who have carried on the irresponsibility of the Vote Leave campaign by continuing to give us no details.

We are well aware that the Secretary of State does not like the use of the prerogative, but this could all have been avoided. Let us give credit where it is due: I give
credit to David Cameron—hon. Members will not hear this often from SNP Members, and, frankly, they will not hear it often from Conservative Members either. I wish to sit down with the then First Minister of Scotland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), and hammered out the Edinburgh agreement to give the Scottish independence referendum a legal footing to remove any uncertainty. I will read a little of agreement, which was agreed by the Westminster Government and the Scottish Government—and full credit goes to everybody, particularly the officials who worked so hard on it. It states:

“The governments are agreed that the referendum should...have a clear legal base”—

just imagine if the Government had done that—

“be legislated for by the Scottish Parliament;...be conducted so as to command the confidence of parliaments, governments and people; and...deliver a fair test and a decisive expression of the views of people...and a result that everyone will respect.”

It went on:

“The two governments are committed to continue to work together constructively in the light of the outcome, whatever it is, in the best interests of the people of Scotland and of the rest of the United Kingdom.”

The question is: why was there so little preparation? Was it negligence, breath-taking complacency, or did they think that everyone would be okay regardless and they did not need to bother?

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): If my hon. Friend has been following the Supreme Court case as closely as I have, he will be aware that it was pointed out by senior counsel for the respondents yesterday that the Government had the opportunity to give legal force to this referendum, as a result of the amendment proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), but they specifically said that they did not want to do so. The now Leader of the House, who was then the Minister for Europe, said:

“The legislation is about holding a vote; it makes no provision for what follows. The referendum is advisory”.—[Official Report, 16 June 2015; Vol. 597, c. 231.]

It was said quite clearly by the Government that it was their intention to make no provision for what would follow.

Stephen Gethins: My hon. and learned Friend makes a very fine point, as always.

Let me make another comparison. We are here to scrutinise the work of the Government. They put forward manifestos before elections, and we scrutinise those. No one questions the idea that the Government should try to prepare a manifesto. Before elections, officials pore over the manifestos of the parties standing, including even the no-hopers—some poor soul in the civil service has to go through the Labour party manifesto!

Whatever happened, the Government got it wrong and need to change course. That is the responsibility of the Members who campaigned for out. It is not just us asking these questions: Manfred Weber, president of the European People’s party group in the European Parliament, has said:

“I haven’t really heard how the British government want to tackle Brexit or what Brexit really means.”

The Foreign Secretary has some responsibility, and has a job on his hands. I hope everyone on the Government Benches is taking him terribly seriously nowadays, as they have been told to do so. He is determined to make a “titanic success” of this process, but he has been telling everyone a different story. I wonder if that goes beyond the Brexit process. What about when he decides what Christmas card he should give his Foreign Secretary counterparts? Will it be a Christmas tree, or is that perhaps a bit too German? Will it be the flight into Egypt, or is that a bit too soft on refugees? Will he go for Santa on his way from Lapland with his elves, or does that give him freedom of movement problems? Perhaps everyone will just get two and be done with it.

Look at the chaos at the heart of this Government and compare and contrast it with the Scottish Government. Ireland is a hugely important partner and key nation—a partner nation and our sister nation. Charlie Flanagan told his Government’s Brexit Committee that he had no idea how the UK would approach Brexit. The Irish Minister for Jobs described the International Trade Secretary as like a husband who wants a divorce, but “to keep all the assets and the family home.”

Compare that with the reception that the First Minister got in Dublin just last week. Compare it with the partnership that we are building. [Interruption.] Members call getting a positive response grandstanding! The Government wish they could get a positive response from a European partner. Even James Reilly, the deputy leader of Fine Gael, said:

“We are very much heartened by the fact that Scotland voted to stay in the EU. We would be very supportive of ensuring that Scotland’s voice is heard during the UK negotiations, as well as the voices of our fellow Celts north of the Border, who also voted to stay within the EU.”

The Government are in chaos, pure and simple. That chaos is affecting our day-to-day lives and will continue to do so. This is too important to let the Government off the hook about it. It is too important not to have full scrutiny, and it is too important to the powers of the devolved Administrations for it to be left purely to this place. That is why we cannot back the Secretary of State’s amendment today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. On account of the number of would-be participants in the debate, it is necessary to impose a time limit. We will start with a time limit of eight minutes on Back-Bench speeches, but I give due notice that that is not likely to endure for very long. Members can help each other, however.

2.13 pm

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I will, I hope, be brief. I support the Government’s amendment, and wish to make it clear that I believe that making great pace in getting ourselves through the process and into the negotiations is the key for whatever the Government do now.

Most people, including the Opposition, fail to define what leaving the European Union actually means. They keep saying that they will not and do not want to frustrate the will of the British people and that that means they do not want to delay the triggering of article 50. But in the same breath—with respect to the
hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer)—they go on to qualify what leaving actually means. When listening to him, the definition I heard was that he wants to be a member of everything that we are in as members of the EU now, with one or two small changes—so he does not actually want to leave. In that sense, the purpose behind what the Opposition are doing speaks more of their own problems than of the negotiations that the Government will embark on once we activate article 50. I will say more on that in a moment.

I make no bones about the fact that I voted and campaigned for the UK to leave the European Union. I believe that it is necessary for us to understand what we mean by that—to define it, and then to act on that, as some of my colleagues have already said. Leaving the European Union at its most basic will mean that we will no longer be subject to European law. From that flow the other elements that were debated during the campaign. The public most clearly want to take back control of their borders with the European Union and to take back control of the money raised from them in taxation. Those things cannot happen if we are subject to European law. This, then, is the key element: leaving the European Union means that we are no longer subject to the jurisprudence of European law. That is really quite important. The failure of the Opposition to accept that means that they are not really in favour of leaving, and have not even accepted that we are leaving; they are debating how we stay in with modifications.

On that principle, I remind the House that the Centre for Social Justice published a report about why people voted to leave, called “48:52”. That report made it very clear—even many remainers have said the same—that the public wanted control of migration and they wanted sovereignty returned. I was quite surprised by their using and agreeing with the word “sovereignty”. We are always being told in this House that no one out there cares about sovereignty and that it is an esoteric issue debated only here by obsessed politicians who cannot get away from the fact that no one talks about it out in the country. In fact, sovereignty was the key element that the people spoken to for the report all agreed that they wanted—to take back control, the phrase that we use endlessly when debating this matter.

We are therefore clear about what people wanted. When people say we do not know what the public wanted, that is simply not true. They do a disservice to the general public if they cannot understand what they meant when they voted to leave the European Union. The public were very clear on that. I have heard the Liberals go on about how people voted to leave but did not vote for a destination. Leaving is a destination. It means we are in control of ourselves. This country is not moving. It is staying where it is, but we will no longer be subject to European law. Playing silly games does not help anyone to believe that, fundamentally, politicians understand what they are going through.

Given all that, there is no point during any of the negotiations in our trying to ask the European Union for something that it simply cannot and will not give us. This is the main point. There is no point going to the EU and saying, as a point of special pleading, “We want to be out of the European Union and are going to be free to make our own laws, but will you let us stay in the single market, and can we stay in the customs union?” I fully understand the position of those of my colleagues who want to stay in those elements. That is a wholly reasonable position, but if we are leaving the European Union, staying in those two things does not stand. More importantly, I would not want to, because that would again bring us under the control of the acquis communautaire, and not being so is one of the main reasons for leaving. The Opposition asked for enough detail. The strategic aim is on those points—that is enough detail.

On the customs union, I come back to this simple point. Why would the United Kingdom want to stay in the customs union when one of the key elements behind making the important decision to leave the European Union was getting back the opportunity to make our own trade arrangements with other countries? I would rather we stayed in than stay in the customs union. It seems completely pointless to embroil ourselves in the customs union—to go through all the rigmarole, arguments, debates and rows, only to find that at the end of the day we do not have the jewel in the crown of our making free trade arrangements.

On that point, I have something interesting to say to the House. I discovered the other day that there are now no fewer than five elements of legislation—three Bills, I think, and two amendments to Bills—going through both the House of Representatives and the Senate that pave the way for a free trade agreement between the US and the United Kingdom. So much for the current President’s view that we will be at the back of the queue. It appears that the legislators in Congress see us wholly at the front of it. They know the reason why: we are the great free trading nation of the world. We believe in free trade, and that is the direction in which we want to take ourselves, and, I hope, many others. For us, the rest of the debate, once we get through that and understand its relevance, is about process.

I listened very carefully to the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras as he spoke for the Opposition, and I understand deeply the problem the Opposition have right now. The Conservatives were in opposition for a number of years and we were often divided. I was a Leader of the Opposition and I remember it very well. Leading the Opposition is like herding cats and there are a lot of cats sitting on the Benches behind him. They are divided about what they want. They are exposed in a simple position of not really wanting to leave, but recognising that 70% of them now sit in constituencies that voted overwhelmingly to leave. They are focusing on the fact that they run the risk, politically, of being in danger when the next election in called.

I understand fully Labour Members’ need to somehow try to confuse the issue with this particular agreement in relation to the amendment. However, the Government amendment is very clear. It sets a date by which article 50 has to be invoked. By not voting against the amendment, the Labour party will be giving the Government a blank cheque to go forward and invoke article 50 without any real caveats. I am wholly in favour of that. I have to say, because I support the Government, but I did not think Labour Members were supporting the Government. I welcome them to that position, although some of my hon. Friends absolutely deplore them for doing so.
from the shaking of heads that many on their own Benches deplore the weakness they seem to have shown, but I congratulate them—

Mr Speaker: Order. I was momentarily distracted by another hon. Member speaking to me. The right hon. Gentleman was a beneficiary for a few seconds, but I am afraid his time has now elapsed.

2.21 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I want to begin by expressing my concern about the continuing tone of some of the debate on the UK’s exit from the European Union. I also want to express the hope, which may be vain, that today will mark the end of the phony war.

The decision has been made. We all campaigned on one side or the other and we accept the result. Parliament will vote in favour of triggering article 50. The deal—this is the importance of the motion tabled by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer)—is that in return the Government will come forward with, and get on with producing, a plan. It is entirely reasonable that the House and the British public should expect the Government to publish a plan well in advance of that vote. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister should be trying to unite our country of that task and the importance of the outcome to every single person who lives in the United Kingdom. I also want to express the hope, which may be vain, that today will mark the end of the phony war.

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So please, can we have an end to talk about “democracy deniers” and “remoaners”? One headline yesterday read:

“Forty pro-EU Conservative MPs defy the will of the people to ‘side with Labour’.”

and the Prime Minister’s official spokesperson said:

“While others have seemingly made clear they want to frustrate the will of the British people, the Government is pressing on with it.”

May we have an end to that? It does a profound disservice to the scale of the task our country faces, to the seriousness of that task and the importance of the outcome to every single person who lives in the United Kingdom. I say to the Secretary of State that the Government and the Prime Minister should be trying to unite our country as they go about their task—we all agree that we should try to achieve the best possible deal—and to recognise their responsibilities to the 48% as well as the 52%. Maybe today will mark the day when they begin to do that.

Of course there are different views about the future of our relationship with the EU. Leaving the EU is not in doubt, but the nature of that new relationship—here I disagree with the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith)—is up for debate.

Sir Edward Leigh: We accept that Labour is going to vote for article 50 and we all want the plan, but does the right hon. Gentleman believe that Labour should not put forward an amendment on the article 50 vote that lays down a specific future, for instance, staying in the single market?

Hilary Benn: No, I do not. First, we have no idea what the legislation will look like. I would just make the point that, when I last checked, Norway is not a member of the European Union. Unless any hon. Members wish to contradict me, it is not a member. It is outside the EU and it is a member of the single market. What that demonstrates is that there are choices to be made about our future relationship with the EU.

All any unreasonable delay in bringing forward the plan will do is create further uncertainty. The hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) is no longer in his place, but he said that it might consist of hints. I merely remind the House that when Moses came down from the mountain bearing the tablets, they did not contain the 10 hints. He was pretty clear about what he was telling people to do. I remind the House that the Secretary of State has got up eight times to enlighten us not a great deal about the Government’s objectives, and I have never heard Parliament described as “elbow joggers” before, although I did like the analogy. We are not elbow joggers, but participants in the process and we intend to scrutinise the Government as they undertake it. Apart from anything else, it would have been quite unacceptable for the Government to have told the 27 members states what their objectives were before they told Parliament and the British people. It is therefore real important that we get the plan and that the Government publish one with substance.

To be fair to the Government, in some areas, we know what the plan is. This has been put out very clearly for the car industry. We know what the Government want: no tariffs and no bureaucratic impediments. Those were the words of the Business Secretary. They do not want anything to happen that would make it more difficult to trade. I am sure the rest of the manufacturing sector says, in all the meetings the Secretary of State is having, “Okay, that’s great for cars, but what about us?” Is it unreasonable for the Government then to say what their objectives are for the rest of manufacturing industry? I think that is perfectly reasonable.

There is then the curious case of the customs union, which got even curioser during the Secretary of State’s speech. The Prime Minister has now told us twice that it is not a binary choice. Now we understand it is a four-way choice. The Secretary of State said there are four different models. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who unfortunately is no longer in her place, asked a perfectly reasonable question: whether he could at least tell us what the four different options are, so that we can all join in the conversation in which of the four the Government might eventually decide to choose.

Presumably, we are going to seek maximum access to the single market. For financial services, and the jobs and the tax revenue that depend on it, it is really important that we are able to keep access to the single market. I am sure that causes the Chancellor to lie awake at night, worrying about it. How will those controls on free movement, which the Secretary of State reminded us of, work in practice? How will they affect lecturers at universities, doctors and nurses, people picking and processing vegetables, chefs, care workers, highly skilled engineers, technicians and IT specialists? Will companies—this is a question we have heard a lot in the Select Committee—continue to be able to move their staff within their companies to another base elsewhere in Europe to repair a product, solve a problem or create a new business opportunity? When will we be able to offer clarity to EU citizens about their position here? We now know from the Home Secretary that they will all have to be documented. It is a fair question: how many civil servants will that take, how much will it cost and when will it be completed?
What about our universities? Young people from the rest of Europe will be asking themselves whether they are still going to apply to come to Britain, and when will they stop being treated as a home student and become an overseas student? They need to know and the universities need to be able to plan. Will we continue to participate in the Erasmus programme that allows young people in Britain from low-income backgrounds to study elsewhere in Europe? Will we continue to be a part of Horizon 2020?

What about the whole range of agencies? I will pick one: the European Medicines Agency. Now, one could say that wanting to remain a member of the EMA is cherry-picking. However, working with our European neighbours to agree on how quickly and safely we can bring new medicines to market is good for patients in Britain as well as patients in Europe. I plead with the Government to be just a bit more enthusiastic—I do not say this so much about the Secretary of State—and clear that they are determined to find a way of continuing to co-operate on foreign policy, defence, security and the fight against terrorism, because that is so important to us all.

Finally, on transitional arrangements, the cliff edge and the negotiating plan, previous Governments, in respect of a whole host of treaties, including the Lisbon treaty, the constitutional treaty, the Nice treaty, and the Amsterdam treaty, and even when we sought to join the common market in 1967, all set out what they were trying to achieve. George Brown talked about the need for considerable adaptations and an adequate period. If it was sensible to admit the need for transitional arrangements when joining the common market, which was a much simpler organisation, is it not sensible for the Government to admit now that, if they cannot negotiate everything within 18 months—listen to what Michel Barnier said yesterday—they will be prepared, if necessary—

Emma Reynolds: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Hilary Benn: Will I get more injury time, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Indeed.

Hilary Benn: Then of course I give way.

Emma Reynolds: My right hon. Friend is very generous. Does he agree that businesses have expressed concern about the uncertainty created by the cliff edge in March 2019, about how we might fall back on WTO rules and tariffs and about how bad that would be not only for businesses but for jobs, our constituents and the broader economy?

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have heard a lot of evidence before the Select Committee, of which she is a valued member, saying precisely that. As she said, we have heard much about bureaucracy, rules of origin, delays and so on. Whole businesses have been created on the basis of goods moving back and forth four, five, six times before finally being added to the product being sold. People need to understand that the way business works in the Europe of which we have been a part creates and sustains jobs. To say, “We will walk away. It doesn’t matter. We can cope,” really misses the point about why business is worried about the implications.

The last point I want to make to the Secretary of State concerns the question of a vote on the final deal. I heard him say today, “I expect there will be a vote”.

Well, I expect that the District line will turn up within five minutes, but today there were longer delays. He said, as I understood it, that it was inconceivable that there would not be a vote. Well, some people would have said it was inconceivable that Donald Trump would be elected President of the United States. It does not fill me with a great deal of confidence. I gently say to him that the simple response to the question, “Will there be a vote when the deal comes before us after the negotiation?”, is to stand up, look the House direct in the eye, and say, “Yes, there will be a vote.”

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): It gives me pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). It shows the odd situation we are in that I can say I agreed with every word he uttered. It might be a long time before either of us finds ourselves in that situation on any other subject, but then this is unlike any decision that has come to the House for many years.

We all know that when we leave the EU and begin the several-years process of deciding our future political and economic relationships with Europe and the rest of the world, we will be embarking on some of the most complicated and epoch-making decisions that the House will have faced for a century. Although those debates will come later—and I will not argue today my well-known views on the merits of EU membership—I think that the decisions we are taking today on the parliamentary procedure that should apply to a Government engaged in policy making and acting on behalf of the UK, including future citizens, not just present citizens, are equally important. If we carelessly agree to things today, we might create precedents that will be quoted in future to the detriment of both Houses of Parliament and of the system of checks, balances and accountability that is crucial to our constitution. Of course, today, I speak politically not legally—we all await the outcome of the serious issues before the Supreme Court.

I do not understand why the Government indicated that today’s Opposition day motion posed some sort of threat. With great respect to the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who leads for the Opposition—he is working very subtly, and I have high regard for how he conducts himself—it is a harmless motion, a plain and simple motion, setting out what one would expect to happen in any similar circumstances and what one would certainly expect to have happened at any time in the past 100 to 150 years—certainly in every Parliament I have sat in.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Surely you haven’t been here 150 years!

Mr Clarke: No—only the last few decades can I recall directly. In any previous Parliament—certainly the ones I sat in—the process to be followed would have been
regarded as self-evident: the Government would produce a policy statement, a White Paper, setting out its strategic objectives, their vision, for the role they were seeking for the United Kingdom, the House of Commons would be invited to vote on that strategy and to approve or deny it; then, with the approval of the House, the Government would go forward, again with the consent of the House, and invoke article 50; then they would start the negotiations. It is a quite unnecessary performance to try to modify that, but I am extremely worried that people are trying to do so.

I would echo the comments of the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins). I do not think that scrutiny and debate are a threat to a Government or to the quality of decision making. It is my opinion that we should return to proper Cabinet government in this country. If a Minister comes forward with controversial proposals, it is useful to have them tested by colleagues and improved in discussion, before they are sent to the House. Every Minister has taken part in debates in the House of Commons, and of course they maintain their course, but every now and then they will have a sinking feeling that their opponent is actually making rather a strong point. In such cases, one goes away and makes improvements. In strengthening their negotiating position, the Government could benefit from such a fit and proper process, particularly given that at the moment it is sadly clear from the constant remarks to the newspapers and the occasional leaks that the Ministers have no idea what the strategy is and do not agree with each other anyway.

The Government have two or three arguments against this. The point about the royal prerogative is a matter for the Supreme Court. The excellent Treasury Devil, James Eadie, for whom I have the highest respect, has apparently argued that the royal prerogative still applies to making war as well as to making treaties. I will wait for the legal judgment but, politically, had Tony Blair decided when invading Iraq to tell the House of Commons that it was not a matter for the House of Commons and that he was invoking the royal prerogative rather than seeking a vote, he would have had even more trouble than he had in any case as a result of the strange way he went about the vote.

We are told that the referendum somehow overrides the centuries-old tradition of parliamentary accountability. I will not comment on the pathetically low level of debate, as reported in the national media, on both sides during the referendum campaign. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) has been that these kinds of decisions are not taken on the basis of telling Parliament that it has nothing to do with it and that Members will not have a vote. On the basis of that argument, the Cameron Government would have proceeded with their intervention in Syria, which we decided that we did not want; they would not even have offered the Commons a vote before they proceeded. In this particular instance, no Government that I can recall would have had the nerve to come along to Parliament and say, “Oh, we are exercising the royal prerogative; we are not going to ask you.”

Finally, let me deal with the nature of accountability. I am not sure that the Government have yet wholly picked up the point, apart from the fact that they have to get out of being defeated on a motion in a Labour Supply day. We are told, “Oh, the Government will make statements.” Well, the Government have been making statements, in which the rather vague language of “a plan” is used. We will probably be told that the plan is to have a red, white and blue Brexit and that we are believers in free trade, whilst we are giving up all the conditions that govern free trade in the single market. Apparently, not only are we going to give up the European Court of Justice, which we have always used very successfully to resolve disputes, but we are going to have trade agreements with everybody else and not abide by the rules of those either, if we feel like it. We need a White Paper, a strategy, votes in this House and clarity on policy.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke).

This debate might appear just to be about this House, and the rights of this House and whether we get a plan. It is not. And it is not about whether we were for leave or for remain. It is about a deeply divided country. The truth is that we are divided between people who voted leave and fear being betrayed, and people who voted remain and fear a deep sense of loss.

In case we have forgotten, after all this is over—I suspect it will take more than two years—leavers and remainers will have to live in the same country. That is why I believe that the way we conduct this debate, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, is absolutely crucial and all of us, however we voted in the referendum, should be seeking to unite the country and not divide it. What does that demand?
First, I believe we need to honour the result of the referendum. It was a referendum that, as the House knows, I did not seek, and it was close, but it was clear and it needs to be respected, in my view. We are leaving the European Union; I could not put it any plainer than that. That is my starting point. But unifying the country takes a lot more than simply saying “Brexit means Brexit” or even “red, white and blue Brexit”.

There are hugely significant and material choices to be made by the Government and our EU partners, which will have implications for our country for decades to come. That is why it is good that the Government have said that they are going to publish a plan. I looked up the “Chambers Dictionary” definition of a plan, and it is this:

“a thought-out arrangement or method for doing something”. That seems to me to be more than a series of hints, to use the words of the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller). What the Government have committed to—there should be no doubt about this—is the thought-out arrangement that they favour for Brexit, and they have committed to produce that to the House before the negotiations begin.

We know the key questions that need to be answered. Do we remain in the single market or not? Do we remain in the customs union—that has been debated today—or not? If Brexit is outside the customs union, as seems to be the Government’s position—maybe, although there are four different options and we do not know what they are—what is the best estimate of the economic impact of that on our country and every one of our constituencies and constituencies? The reason this matters is that these are not nit-picking or procedural questions; they are questions that will affect millions of people and businesses up and down the country. There are not simply matters of procedure.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that this is not nit-picking. A key issue in my constituency is the funding for the South Wales Metro, which was due to come from European funding. The First Minister is going to Europe to see what he can get for the next two years, but this is a huge area of uncertainty, and it will affect hundreds of thousands of people in south Wales.

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend puts it very well.

What about the plan on immigration, including for citizens of this country who want to go and work or live abroad in the future? What is the vision? I think the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, who is no longer in his place, was nodding and saying that they would produce a plan on our approach to crime and terrorism, foreign policy, climate and energy policy, in respect of which Governments of both parties have taken a leadership role in Europe. What is the future for that? We do not know at the moment, so it must be in the plan.

Our motion is not a request for every dot and comma of the negotiations, to use the Prime Minister’s words, to be included. We are talking about basic and fundamental questions about the Government’s vision of our economy and place in the world, post-Brexit.

As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) said, the plan must be produced in January—soon enough for Parliament and, crucially, the British people to debate it properly. I had some time on my hands, so I looked up the consultations on which the Government have embarked since the 2015 general election. There were 1,200 in all, and they include everything from consultation on the code for small sea-going passenger ships to one on the regulation of traffic signs. The Government consult a lot. Are we seriously saying that the issue on which they are not going to consult the British people is the post-Brexit arrangements for our country? I would point out that this is less of a niche issue than the regulation of traffic signs—important though that issue is.

Here is the thing. The Government said that they want to bring the country with them. That is really important, and those words were echoed by the leader of the Scottish Conservative party, who said that we have got to listen to the voices of the 48%. But a Government cannot take the country with them if they do not tell the country where they are seeking to go before the negotiations begin.

I have no greater authority to cite on this than the current Prime Minister. In 2007, she wrote a very interesting pamphlet with somebody called Nicholas Timothy, who I believe is her chief of staff. It is called “Restoring Parliamentary Authority: EU Laws and British Scrutiny.” I am told that it has been taken off the relevant website, but fortunately the House of Commons Library has a copy. It says:

“Our feeble system of scrutiny undermines Parliament’s ability to check or restrain the Government’s action in Europe... We therefore need a system that gives Parliament real powers over ministers, enough time to scrutinise, and the transparency to restore public trust in the process.” I could not have put it better myself.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con) rose—

Edward Miliband: I give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who might well have had a hand in the pamphlet or written many like it.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am grateful. To clarify, for the benefit of the House, is the right hon. Gentleman arguing whether, after the scrutiny, Parliament or Government get to decide on how to proceed with the negotiations?

Edward Miliband: I believe, as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe said, that of course there should be a parliamentary vote—a mandate for the Government. That takes me precisely to further crucial points. The Government think that they will be weaker if they bring a plan to the House and get our support. I think the Government will be stronger in the negotiations, because they will be able to go to our partners in Europe and say that the plan is not just the Government’s, but one endorsed by the British Parliament. The Government’s excuse relates to secrecy, and I think this needs to be dealt with. I do not think this argument stands up even to the most basic scrutiny. Let us think about how things will unfold. Once the formal negotiations begin, the EU negotiator will obviously have to confer with the 27 other Governments. Our Government’s intention and detailed proposals will remain secret for a few days if they are really lucky, but probably
not even for a few days. The Government’s position will inevitably leak. The question before us is not whether the Government’s intentions are kept secret—which is apparently what the Prime Minister wants—but whether those in this Parliament and this country are the last people to know what the Government’s intentions actually are. It seems to me that there is absolutely no chance of the Government’s uniting the country, and taking the country with them, if they adopt that approach.

There is also the question whether the referendum decides the form that Brexit will take. I do not believe that it does, as many other Members have said, but it is not just me who takes that view. Daniel Hannan, one of the leading Leave campaigners, has said:

“Some Leavers claim the result as a mandate for whatever arrangement they happened to want.”

That is the truth about this, and there is no getting away from it. There are many different forms of Brexit, as we see in the numerous other countries that are outside the European Union.

I want to end where I began, with a point about the spirit of the debate. My right hon. Friend for Leeds Central quoted some comments that had been made by Downing Street spokespersons on Monday, but they said something else which I find incredibly troubling. They said that those of us who are asking for transparency were not “backing the UK team”. In other words, we are not being patriotic. By my reckoning, that puts Sir John Major, Ruth Davidson and a number of Conservative Members of Parliament in the unpatriotic category. I am used to being called unpatriotic, and my dad has been called unpatriotic as well, but it really is something when Conservative Members are called unpatriotic. We know that things have become desperate for the Government when that starts happening.

We are not seeking proper scrutiny of the plans for Brexit because of our lack of patriotism; we are doing it out of patriotism, because we believe in the unity of the country. We believe that the country must be brought together. We believe that the cohesion of the country must be protected. This is the most complex and treacherous situation that our country has faced for a generation. Candour and transparency are not qualities that the Government should fear, but qualities that they should embrace, because they are the only route to uniting our nation, and we all have a responsibility to seek to unify the country.

I urge the Government not to choose a path of division, excluding the 48%, refusing to share their intentions and vilifying their opponents, including those on their own side. That is not behaviour equal to the moment: it is not behaviour that our country and the world need. We all have a responsibility to rise to the moment, and that is what we must do in the months and years ahead.

2.52 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Listening to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband)—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the hon. Gentleman has been notified of this, but I should notify the House that, although the clock can be stopped at this point, the time limit for Back-Bench speeches is being reduced to five minutes, with immediate effect.

Sir William Cash: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I was about to refer to the final remarks made by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North. I think it was Samuel Johnson who said that calling on patriotism was the refuge of the scoundrel. I listened with great care to what the right hon. Gentleman said, as I always do, but I have to say that he dodged a number of issues, not least when he described the dictionary definition of a plan as something that was thought out or a method of doing something. He said that that was not the case for the Government, but in fact, of course, it is.

It is very simple—as simple as this: there was a vote, which was authorised by a sovereign Act of this Parliament. That Act transferred the right to make a decision to the British people, and they made it. The right hon. Gentleman acknowledges that, and he says that he wants to respect it, but the reality is that the decision was about whether to stay in the European Union or to leave it, and the bottom line is that the people of this country decided, by a substantial majority, to leave. The right hon. Gentleman, he tells us, accepts that, but then he sets up a fog, as does the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and as does my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). We are given a whole lot of amorphous details that are intended to make the situation far more complicated than it is.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, not for the first time during these debates. He and I took part in a referendum in the 1970s, when he was no doubt saddened to find himself on the losing side. I seem to remember that he strongly took the constitutional view that the result was purely advisory, and it did not change either his views or his political campaigning one iota afterwards—just as Nigel Farage and many of his supporters made it perfectly clear when they were expecting to lose this referendum that they were waiting for the next chance, and they were going to go on. We must have respect for each other’s opinions, rather than telling each other that we have been ordered by an opinion poll to start abandoning them.

Sir William Cash: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend, but I voted yes in the 1975 referendum—[Interruption.] I accept my right hon. and learned Friend’s apology. It was only when I came to the House and the Whips made what I think was a terrible mistake of making me a member of the then Select Committee on European Legislation that I began to see the truth. I discovered that, actually, what the Maastricht rebellion was all about. There is a very interesting article by Philip Johnston about it in today’s Daily Telegraph.

It is because of the political union with which we are still lumbered—because we have not, as yet, left the European Union—that this is so essential. Back in May I wrote a paper about the question of repeal, entitled “Achieving leaving by repealing”. The laws that we incorporated by virtue of the European Communities Act 1972, as they accumulated, created circumstances in which we were becoming increasingly suborned to an undemocratic system of majority voting, which was combined with the ever-increasing assertiveness of one
country in particular, and others in general, congregating around one another. That put us at an incredible disadvantage.

The European Scrutiny Committee, of which I am Chairman, conducted an inquiry into the manner in which the Council of Ministers operated and reached the conclusion that it was not transparent. We took evidence from Simon Hix. The decisions that are made on behalf of the British people and imposed on us by virtue of section 2 of the European Communities Act are neither democratic nor accountable, and they are not transparent. That is why it is so essential that we repeal that legislation. While the Supreme Court is weaving in and out of political issues and trying to avoid article 9 of the Bill of Rights—I do not need to go into that now—the bottom line is that what we are facing is a political imperative towards a greater degree of political union.

I discovered that last week when I went to a conference in Brussels, where Mario Monti said, “Europe needs political integration or there will be war. It is as simple as that.” That is the manner in which this argument is being constructed across the water. Similarly, Chancellor Kohl said that there would be war in Europe if we did not agree to the Maastricht treaty and the whole European integration process. That was why my hon. Friends and I—there are not many of us left in the House now—opposed the treaty. We saw that it was European government. That was the key—for us, it was a question of democracy above all else.

I wanted to intervene on the speech made by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central, but unfortunately he would not give way. I rather suspect that I know why, but there we are. I wanted to ask a question that I will ask those on the Opposition Front Bench as well. Will they oppose the Second Reading of the great repeal Bill when it comes before the House? That will be a crucial test. Let us leave aside all that is going on in relation to article 50, which is about one simple question: are we using the prerogative or not? In my opinion, that is largely a very big storm in a very big teacup. The bottom line is that we will agree to article 50. The real question is: are we going to leave the European Union?

Let me say this very simply. We should not be supplicants in these negotiations. We should say no to the single market, no to the customs union and no to the European Court, because we cannot be subject to that European Court in any circumstances. We should say yes to borders, yes to free trade and yes to regaining the democracy for which this House has stood for hundreds of years.

2.59 pm

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government could show good faith by agreeing to reveal their goals and negotiating strategy with the devolved Administrations under Privy Council rules, which would put aside the whole question that the Government cannot reveal their negotiating hand?

Mr MacNeil: My hon. Friend makes an excellent suggestion; perhaps the Government should explore that further.

We should think of our other neighbours, not just the Irish. What does this mean for the Isle of Man, for Jersey or for Guernsey—for people we have close links to? What, indeed, does it mean for Gibraltar and the Gibraltarians—people I respect greatly and have very close links to myself?

We find ourselves in a very difficult situation here in Parliament. The Government have created a problem of their own making because of the Prime Minister’s naivety in not taking this process forward by putting a simple measure before Parliament. That would have stopped us from needing to go to the courts in the first place. Now the devolved Administrations have woken up to the fact that they can be involved, and maybe—probably—the Supreme Court will rule that the process requires the consent of the Scottish Parliament, in which case Brexit is finished, Brexit is over and Brexit will be blocked.
We see also that Europe is dictating the pace. The Barnier declaration yesterday that the UK will have 18 months to negotiate after triggering article 50 shows that it is dictating the terms, too. That is because I fear there are more experienced negotiators in the tiny Faroe Islands than in the United Kingdom, and the UK negotiators will probably be scalped very quickly.

We need to know where the UK plans to go. The question in June was: should the UK remain a member of the EU or leave the EU? Nobody voted to leave the European economic area. Nobody voted to leave EFTA. Nobody voted to leave the customs union. Arguments afterwards that that question gives a mandate for those subsequent steps are nonsense. There is no mandate to take these next steps. Leaving the European Union can mean being like Norway or like Iceland, as Daniel Hannan, Nigel Farage and a number of Conservative Members said before the referendum, before changing their tune quite markedly afterwards.

We need answers. We need to know what the destination is, because a lack of a strategy is not what people in the UK need for their jobs, investments, industries, employment, families and communities. No answers is not a black Brexit or a white Brexit—or a red, white and blue Brexit. No answers is a yellow Brexit—it is a cowardly Brexit. It is a Brexit that shows that this Government have absolutely no idea where they are going, and it is a Brexit to keep together our ragbag of Brexiteers who each want a different one of the seven options. When the Brexiteers see which of the options the Government choose, they are going to fight like cats in a sack.

That is the difficulty that the UK Government face. They cannot consult the devolved Administrations and they cannot consult their European friends because they cannot consult properly and meaningfully around the Cabinet table as each member of the Government supports something different. There is going to be mighty trouble in the UK Government when they do decide in March.

3.5 pm

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) and a superb argument against secession from a Scottish nationalist. I thank the right hon. Members for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) because the challenge they put to the House is one to which we should all attempt to rise: how can we ensure not just that we respect the result that 52% of people voted for, but that we involve the 48% who voted remain for a variety of reasons? While I am grateful to them for their speeches, which I thought were for the most part very constructive, I was disappointed in the Front-Bench speech from the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). He spoke for nearly 40 minutes, longer than some Pinter plays and many Haydn symphonies, and he spoke on what he referred to as the “defining issue” facing the UK, but he did not reveal at any point what Labour’s position is on our future relationship with the EU. He did not reveal on behalf of the 48% for whom he purports to speak whether they want a single market or the customs union. What we had was 40 minutes of pious vapouring—a hole in the air masquerading as an argument.

One of the reasons why it is so important that we hear from the 48% is that we know what the 52% voted for. Some in the course of this debate have tried to complicate and obfuscate, but it was made perfectly clear not just by the Vote Leave campaign, in which I was privileged to play a role, but by the then Prime Minister and Member for Witney; by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), the then Chancellor of the Exchequer; and by Lord Mandelson. It was made clear by every single one of the leading representatives of the remaining campaign that voting to leave the EU meant leaving the single market. There should be no ambiguity about that point. The public were fully informed and they took their decision in full knowledge.

That is one of the reasons why I am glad our Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer—both, it must be said, among the 48% who voted remain—are very clear that the result must be respected, and that means ensuring that the votes of 17.4 million people and their determination to leave the single market alongside leaving the EU should be acknowledged.

George Kerevan: Is the right hon. Gentleman telling us that leaving the single market is the Government’s position?

Michael Gove: I am telling the hon. Gentleman that that was the position taken by the British public, including more than 1 million people in Scotland and including many more people in his constituency than voted for the Scottish National party.

Not only do we need to respect the result and what the 52% wanted, but we need to acknowledge some of the concerns put forward by those who articulated the case for remain. There were two powerful concerns that weighed with me. The first was the prospect of an immediate economic shock, should we leave. That was a view put forward by the Governor of the Bank of England and a number of other distinguished economists, but we can now see that, while their concerns were expressed sincerely, they did not come to fruition. The point was made at the time—[Interruption.] I am grateful for the sedentary intervention from the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie), but the point was made at the time that there would be an immediate shock not just to Britain but to the world economy. That shock did not materialise. In fact, since we voted—

Anna Soubry: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Michael Gove: Not quite yet.

Since we voted to leave, we have seen increased investment from Nissan, Jaguar Land Rover, Amazon and Facebook—from a variety of both traditional manufacturing and new technology investors. Far from there being an economic shock, we are the fastest growing economy in the G7.

It was also a legitimate concern of some who voted remain that voting to leave the EU would damage the United Kingdom. The truth is that since we voted to leave the EU, support for a second independence referendum has fallen, support for Scottish independence has fallen, support for the SNP and its secessionist sermonising has fallen, and the single most popular politician in Scotland is Ruth Davidson, the only leader of any party who wants to embrace the result.
Anna Soubry: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Michael Gove: No, I am not giving way.

So on two of the legitimate concerns expressed beforehand—that our economy would be damaged and the Union would be damaged—the evidence is that our economy is stronger and the Union is more popular.

Of course other concerns were expressed by people who voted to remain. Some of them relate to the fate of EU citizens in this country, some relate to future academic and scientific co-operation, and some, naturally, relate to defence and security co-operation. My point is that it is incumbent on everyone—not just the Government but the 48%—to put forward their propositions in this area.

I have made it clear, and I share this view with my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), that I believe that EU citizens in this country should stay and that their role should not be a bargaining chip. I am sure that many of those who voted remain will join me in that call, but where are those who voted to remain, now that power is flowing back to this place for the first time in my life, offering to explain how we can refine regulation and change our laws and rules as we become a self-governing country once more and become freer, more liberal, more prosperous and more creative? I am afraid that, despite some honourable exceptions, most of those people are still looking back in anger, remorse and regret instead of looking forward optimistically. This is a great country. We can achieve great things.

Anna Soubry: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Michael Gove: No thank you.

This Parliament has an opportunity to shape an economic policy, an immigration policy and a knowledge policy that can once again make us a world beater, but if we do not take that opportunity and instead concentrate on seeking to dilute the result of the referendum, I am afraid that, despite some honourable exceptions, most of those people are still looking back in anger, remorse and regret instead of looking forward optimistically. This is a great country. We can achieve great things.

3.11 pm

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). I was pleased that he called for unity, although I am not sure that he actually achieved it in the House during his speech.

This debate has shown why it is so important that Parliament should be able properly to consider the plan for leaving the European Union. There is no doubt in my mind that we will leave; my constituents voted decisively to do so. I absolutely agree with what my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central ( Hilary Benn) said about article 50. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) said, however, this is a time to bring the country together, and it is essential that we work together to get the best deal for our constituents when we leave. This is such an important step to take, and it is inconceivable that as Members of Parliament we should just sit back and let the Government get on with it without telling us, even in broad terms, what discussions they are having. I am therefore pleased that the Government have accepted that they will share with Parliament the broad terms of the negotiations.

Companies in my constituency are suffering because of the uncertainty, and they want to know what analysis is being done of the effect that Brexit will have on them. I have said before that such an analysis should be carried out not only by sector but by region. Ministers have said that they will consult Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland about the Brexit negotiations, but what about Yorkshire and the Humber? What about the other regions of the UK? Will the Minister tell us what the process will be for consulting the regions and how companies and others in my constituency will be able to contribute to that process?

Companies will also want to know what the approach to the single market is going to be. They will want to be assured that if the Government intend to give up our current level of access to the biggest marketplace in the world, they have a clear plan to ensure that businesses and jobs will not be adversely affected. Equally, if the Government intend to seek a transitional deal to make the transition smoother, they should be open and up front about it, so that companies and workers can plan accordingly. The Secretary of State said earlier that workers’ rights would be protected. I welcome that, but I hope the Minister will be able to assure me that he is fully consulting the trade unions on how employment rights will be protected in relation to the European Union.

When we talk about employee rights, part of our discussions about the UK workforce will involve discussing how freedom of movement will operate in a post-Brexit world. We know that this was an issue in the referendum; it certainly was in my constituency. We also know that we have to strike a balance between addressing people’s concerns about how freedom of movement has been operating and ensuring that we do not leave our health service, our food and agriculture sectors and many other industries unable to function because of labour shortages.

We also have to address how freedom of movement has led to the exploitation of workers from other parts of the European Union and the undercutting of UK workers’ wages and conditions. I know from my constituency that agencies have too often operated in an unacceptable way, recruiting from outside the UK while not even advertising in this country, with workers from other European countries coming here on short-term contracts and never knowing from week to week what work is going to be available. I know from discussions with colleagues from socialist and social democratic parties across Europe that other countries are aware of such developing problems, and we need to have an honest debate about this. Surely we should be talking about EU citizens moving to the UK to take up secure employment and about employers being made to take responsibility for how workers are treated, so that UK employees are not left at a disadvantage, with all the resentment that follows on from that. These are just a few of the issues that Parliament should be discussing. I hope that the Minister will be able to give us some reassurances on the negotiations and that he will address the points that are being made today.
Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I want to make two main points. The first is that the Government's position is much clearer than many Opposition Members are willing to believe and that it narrows the range of outcomes very considerably. The second is that what matters as much as, if not more than, the Government's position is the position of our partners in Europe, yet no one on the Opposition Benches has mentioned that—there seems to be a sort of arrogance in suggesting that we can say, "We want this and we'll get it." Or perhaps it is subservience in saying, "We want this and we'll, give any concession in order to obtain it."

The Government's position has ruled out three options. First, we will not be part of the internal market of the European Union. I use the term "internal market" because that is what it is called in European law. There is no such thing in European law as the single market. To be a member of the internal market, we would have to be a member state subject to all the laws of the European Union, and the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State today have said that we will not be subject to the European Court of Justice.

Secondly, we will not be members of the European economic area, because all members of the European economic area have to accept free movement, and the Government have ruled that out. On top of that, we cannot negotiate service deals because we do not have control over the laws governing all our service industries. This was described during the referendum campaign by the current Chancellor of the Exchequer as the worst of all possible worlds, and many others on that side of the argument supported him. Now, however, they suddenly want to be part of that worst of all possible worlds.

Thirdly, we cannot be subject to the common external tariff of the EU because we are champions of free trade, according to the Prime Minister. We set up a Department for International Trade that has to be able to negotiate tariffs. We also want to cut the tariffs on products that we do not produce—including food and clothing products on which the EU imposes very high tariffs—because those tariffs are damaging to the just-about-managing people in this country. So those three options are ruled out, which leaves two realistic options.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith: May I give my right hon. Friend one good example of this? It relates to the import of oranges. Very recently, the customs union has slapped on a tariff increase from 3% to 16%, solely to protect some producers in Spain. That raises the cost of food is now more expensive as a direct result of interventions which the EU has free trade agreements that do not require free movement with 50 countries. The second is that we trade with them on WTO terms and they might try to make trade in our service and financial services industries a bit more difficult. The important thing is that both options are actually very simple to negotiate. Going from zero tariffs to zero tariffs is much easier than negotiating a trade agreement between Canada and the European Union, where each side has 5,000 or 10,000 different tariff lines and must trade them off against each other. We also have exactly the same rules on products and so on as our partners in Europe. The status quo would therefore be simple to negotiate. The WTO option does not even require negotiation; it is what happens if the negotiations have no successful outcome. Both are simple and could be done quickly. I also believe that both options are acceptable to the UK. In the view of most people, retaining the status quo would obviously be the superior option if we could get it immediately, but if we go to trading on WTO terms, the average tariff would be about 4%—much less than that on average on manufactured products, but the 4% includes agricultural products. We have just experienced a 15% devaluation against the euro, so our exporters will, on balance, be much better off even with those tariffs, whereas exporters to us will have to face a 15% hurdle plus that 4% average tariff, so they will be much worse off.

It is important that we emphasise to our negotiating partners that although we might prefer to continue with the status quo, if they do not want it, we are willing to walk away and trade on WTO terms. Quite a few Opposition Members have been trade unionists and are used to negotiating, but not many people in this House are. We cannot successfully negotiate unless we are prepared to walk away with no deal. Ultimately, however, it will be our partners in Europe—the EU 27—that will choose between whether we continue with roughly the status quo or whether we move to WTO terms and some obstacles.

George Kerevan: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Lilley: I am sorry, but I will not.

Our EU partners will choose. If their primary concern is the economic wellbeing of their people, they will choose to continue with free trade. If their overriding primary concern is political and if they want to punish us and be seen to punish us, they will go with WTO terms. In practice, they will punish themselves far more, and we should make that clear. We cannot negotiate our way into making them choose one option over the other. We can perhaps try to persuade them, their industries and their electorates that they will be much better off if they continue to trade with us on roughly the current basis than if they move to WTO terms, under which they will be the principal losers. We are their single biggest market. A fifth of all German cars come here, much French wine comes here, and so on. Let us go to them and say, "It is a simple choice, make that choice"—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

3.23 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The motion before us, moved by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir
Starmer), the shadow Secretary of State, calls for a plan before article 50 is invoked. Since 23 June, the resistance to such calls, for reasons of “no running commentary” or not giving away negotiating positions to what the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), unwisely referred to as our enemy—

Crispin Blunt: The faux outrage that has followed the use of a metaphor is not worthy of the right hon. Gentleman, so I invite him to desist.

Mr McFadden: We are all responsible for what we say, and I do not believe that our European partners are our enemies. Behind all that resistance lies one emotion. It is not the confidence of those who won the referendum campaign, but fear about the contradictory statements made during the campaign, about the exposure of divisions within Government and about the enormity of some of the decisions that must be taken. On one level, I sympathise with Ministers, because the dawning realisation of what they are facing and what must be decided is in some ways something to which I can understand a response of fear. However, that does not serve well either democratic debate or our negotiating position.

To pick up on a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), an assumption has been made that, if we say what we want, that weakens us, but that is not necessarily the case. If we say what we want, that can strengthen our hand, which is precisely why the Secretary of State called for a White Paper in the article he wrote back in July. It is important for Ministers to understand that 23 June was not just a decision by the people on whether we stay in the European Union—although it was obviously that—but the passing of political responsibility for the consequences of that decision to those who led the leave campaign, many of whom now occupy senior Government positions. Despite the fear, there is no place to hide. There is a duty to both leave and remain voters to set out the principal negotiating objectives. There is also a responsibility to accept the consequences of post-referendum decisions.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Like the right hon. Gentleman, I campaigned to remain, and we do all have a responsibility now to try to get the best deal, but the most basic business lesson shows us not only the point about not playing our hand, but that we should not narrow our options. We want to keep our options as wide as possible, not narrow them, which is the thrust of what the Labour Front-Bench spokesman was getting at, which takes us down a narrow lane when we want to keep things as wide as possible to get the best deal.

Mr McFadden: I am afraid that I do not agree with the thrust of the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. Responsibility cannot be evaded. The Government have a duty to do more than define success as whatever it is the Government choose to define as “success”. Fear is no excuse for accusing anyone who asks questions of trying to deny the referendum result or, even worse, of not being behind team UK or of being unpatriotic in some way. The truth is that asking questions like this is in the interests of the country and of voters, both those who voted leave and those who voted remain. It is our political duty, as representatives of our constituents, to ask these questions and to insist on a proper plan for the country’s future.

3.30 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) has made out that the essence of today’s debate is about whether the Government publish a plan and how it is scrutinised, and the shadow Secretary of State echoed that thought. I do not believe that is the debate we are having today; as was made clear in the response to me from the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), the former Leader of the Opposition, the debate we are actually having is congruent with the discussion going on in the Supreme Court over the road. It is about a great constitutional issue: the old Leninist question of “who, whom?” The question things that it is completely reasonable for such a plan to include. Will we stay in the single market? Some hon. Members have said that that question has been decided. I do not believe that it has. If the Government’s position is to withdraw from the single market, is it their aim to ensure equivalent access not only for goods, but for services? What is the position on the customs union? The Government have said that they will not accept free movement as it currently stands. Many of us want the way free movement has worked to be reformed, but what reforms do they want? They have rejected the points-based system, so what can we expect in future? Is it, for example, the same visa system that applies to non-EU immigration? It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that that has resulted in higher levels of immigration from outside the EU in recent years than from within the EU.

If agreement is not reached within the two-year period after triggering article 50, are we happy to fall back on WTO rules, with all that that means, or is it Government policy to seek a transitional agreement to avoid that happening? That is a perfectly reasonable question for us to ask and for the public to ask. Will we be able to avoid customs and people controls on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland? That is another reasonable question. What are the proposals, beyond the single market, for cross-border co-operation on issues such as terrorism, crime and environmental protection? If we do pay in for future access to trade, as the Secretary of State said he was open to doing last week, how will the Government guarantee the spending promises made to universities and to farmers, the promises on regional spending and of course the £350 million a week extra promised during the campaign to the NHS? Will workers’ rights, many of them underpinned by European directives, be guaranteed in the future—and in what way?

As I have said, that is not an exhaustive list and there will be other questions, but I ask them to illustrate that a plan has to be more than a statement and more than a press release; it has to be comprehensive and to have substance. Fear cannot be an excuse for steamrolling through anything the Government choose to define as “success”. Fear is no excuse for accusing anyone who asks questions of trying to deny the referendum result.
is: should the Government of the UK, following a referendum, be able to conduct negotiations in the style and manner and with the intent that they decide, on behalf of the people of the UK, or should Parliament seek to constrain the negotiation, ultimately by passing a law constraining the activities of the Government in that negotiation? That is the issue we are facing.

I wish briefly to argue, in the time allotted, that if we think about it carefully, it is clear that it is impossible to conduct that negotiation successfully on the basis of a legal mandate given by Parliament. Why? It is because once a law is passed that determines negotiation, the negotiation as a whole, and in every particular and at every moment, is justiciable. We will end up with the Supreme Court and lower courts being called upon to decide, from moment to moment, in judicial review after judicial review, whether the Government have sufficiently transparently made clear every detail of the negotiation to satisfy the Court that the mandate of Parliament in the law is being observed; and whether they have fulfilled the terms of the mandate, once everything is transparent. Any Member of this House who believes this country will have an advantage in the outcome from such a process is severely misguided.

I voted to remain, and I still believe that would have been the right decision for this country. I believe we would be better off inside the customs union than out and better off inside the single market than out; I wanted to be free of the rest of the EU’s jurisprudence, but not of those things. I think we might have achieved that, but that world has passed; the referendum has occurred—we are leaving. If we are leaving, we have to negotiate an exit. The horror and the tragedy of the occurrence—we are leaving. If we are leaving, we have to negotiate an exit. The horror and the tragedy of the discussion we are having now is that, if it does lead to negotiation as a whole, and in every particular and at every moment, is justiciable. We will end up with the worse result from the point of view of people such as me who were part of the 48%.

Edward Miliband: In November 1991, John Major came to the House to seek approval for his negotiating mandate—his plan, we might call it—for the Maastricht negotiations. I do not understand how the right hon. Gentleman can say that this is a terrible breach of our practices when John Major did precisely the same thing.

Mr Duncan Smith: During those negotiations, did not John Major say, “don’t bind my hands when I am negotiating” with the European Union?

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Why is it, then, that the European Parliament can be involved in this process, but this sovereign Parliament, because of the problems that the Government have created for themselves, cannot have any say? That is a democratic outrage.

Sir Oliver Letwin: The reason is that the European Parliament is one of the counterparties to the negotiation. The counterparty in our case is the Government of the United Kingdom. We have had a referendum. The Government have to be able to carry through the effect of that referendum, and the plain choice we face is whether or not to constrain the Government. My argument is that, if we constrain the Government, we will end up with a worse result from the point of view of people who believes this country will have an advantage in the outcome from such a process is severely misguided.

Edward Miliband: In November 1991, John Major came to the House to seek approval for his negotiating mandate—his plan, we might call it—for the Maastricht negotiations. I do not understand how the right hon. Gentleman can say that this is a terrible breach of our practices when John Major did precisely the same thing.

Mr Duncan Smith: During those negotiations, did not John Major say, “don’t bind my hands when I am negotiating” with the European Union?

Sir Oliver Letwin: He did. He did not succeed in having his hands not bound, and I repeat that the result was a catastrophe.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Why is it, then, that the European Parliament can be involved in this process, but this sovereign Parliament, because of the problems that the Government have created for themselves, cannot have any say? That is a democratic outrage.

Professor Frank Field: I have listened with care to what is being said, and I think one of the most serious oversights in the contribution of the right hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) is that the European Parliament is a colleague not a partner in negotiations with the European Union. The European Parliament has not had equal status in the Maastricht negotiations, but it is a partner in negotiations with the Union, and it is the only body to have such a status in international negotiations. If we are leaving the European Union, we are leaving the Maastricht treaty and internal practices when John Major did precisely the same thing.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Why is it, then, that the European Parliament can be involved in this process, but this sovereign Parliament, because of the problems that the Government have created for themselves, cannot have any say? That is a democratic outrage.

Edward Miliband: In November 1991, John Major came to the House to seek approval for his negotiating mandate—his plan, we might call it—for the Maastricht negotiations. I do not understand how the right hon. Gentleman can say that this is a terrible breach of our practices when John Major did precisely the same thing.

Mr Duncan Smith: During those negotiations, did not John Major say, “don’t bind my hands when I am negotiating” with the European Union?
Sir Oliver Letwin: My answer is no. It is not right that we in this place should decide those things, because ultimately they can be decided only as part of the negotiations. As a matter of fact, I think that the Government will be compelled by the logic of the situation to take us out of the customs union, but whether or not they do that has to be left in the hands of Ministers to negotiate as part of the complex of negotiations.

3.38 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Let me be absolutely clear. We cannot say this often enough: this debate is not about whether we Brexit but how we Brexit. That is of prime importance. Decisions taken during the withdrawal process could have a huge impact on our economy and the prosperity of the people of this country. I do not accept the comments by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). The future of this country and its prosperity is of prime significance to the Members of this Chamber, and we have a right to discuss, debate and take a vote on it.

The people may have voted for Brexit—we cannot say this often enough, either—but they did not vote to be poorer. I echo the comments made by my right hon. Friends the Members for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). The time for digs against and negative comments about those of us who want the best possible deal for the UK is over. It is time to move on and to be responsible and mature in terms of what we are looking for.

It is the responsibility of Parliament to explore what Brexit means, both for our constituents and, importantly, for businesses located in our constituencies. I shall take for example a key sector of our economy—food and farming, the biggest manufacturing sector in the UK economy, with a value of more than £108 billion, providing 3.9 million jobs. Seventy-five per cent. of our agricultural exports are to the European Union.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): My hon. Friend and I are both members of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Yesterday, I had a meeting with a Minister from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and I fear that there is a problem in the Department with the conflation of two issues—free trade and access to the single market. Will my hon. Friend comment on that issue?

Angela Smith: I shall come on to the option that we should follow in the negotiations. As many Members have illustrated, we all have views on where we should be going. The National Farmers Union has modelled three scenarios for the outcome of the negotiations: a free trade agreement with the European Union; World Trade Organisation rules; and trade liberalisation.

The potential cost to farming of non-tariff barriers to access the EU and worldwide trade range from 5% as a result of regulatory divergence to 8%. If direct farm payments are reduced or taken away completely from farmers in those scenarios, there will be a hugely negative impact on farm incomes, ranging from a reduction of £24,000 per annum under the best deal—the free trade deal—to an impact of over £30,000 per annum on individual farm income under the trade liberalisation scenario. The EU spends £3.2 billion a year on support to farmers, which is just under 25% of what we pay the EU to be a member of the Union. A key question for the Commons is whether we continue direct farm payments to farmers at the existing 100% level. Do we reduce it, and do we look at the impact on farm trade and individual farmers? We need answers to those questions before we can sign off any Government position on what we do in Brussels in summer 2017.

The farming industry employs more than 80,000 seasonal workers a year. The NFU has called for a seasonal agricultural workers permit scheme. The Government refuse to commit to such a scheme, but without that input there is little hope for the horticultural sector. Furthermore, the food and drink manufacturing sector has a skills gap. By 2024, it will stand at 130,000. On top of that, one in 12 employers in the sector report an intention on the part of their employees to go back home.

The road haulage industry, which is a critical service for the food and farming sector, has a skills shortage of 45,000. Sixty thousand drivers in the UK are foreign, mostly from the EU. The veterinary sector is another vital service for the food and farming sector, and reports that over 50% of vets registered every year in the UK come from abroad, mostly the EU.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech about the importance of the farming sector. She will know that we have had representations from the National Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which have millions of members, all of whom are concerned about biodiversity, which is what farmers support in this country. Farmers cannot provide the environmental goods if their income makes farming uneconomic.

Angela Smith: Mr Speaker, I did not get the extra minute for the second intervention.

Mr Speaker: It is right that all of us should be held to account, including the Chair.

Angela Smith: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I accept what my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) said.

The labour shortages that will or could result from Brexit should be taken seriously by the Government. We need to know what resources and plans are required to take account of immigration policy and restrictions on freedom of movement and on the development of the domestic workforce. It is reasonable that this Chamber has an understanding of where the Government are going on this key issue before it accepts the Government’s negotiating position on Brexit. These concerns should be addressed when the Government publish their plan.

My own position is that we should retain membership of the single market, but I also believe that we need a proper timetable and sufficient time for Parliament to scrutinise the proposals and to amend them if necessary. I will vote against the amendment, therefore, because there are no guarantees before us today. Nothing that I have heard today gives me confidence that the Government will not try to wriggle out of the commitment to put a
plan before this House. The vote today is not against Brexit, but against a motion that will potentially curtail the right of Parliament to act in the national interest, as it should do, and in so doing, act in the interests of our constituents.

3.46 pm

**Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this debate.

Let me make it clear at the start, for the benefit of Members and of the Whip on the Bench, that I intend to support both the motion and amendment (a). I am very pleased that the Government have accepted the motion. This is the first time that they have accepted that Parliament should have a say on the triggering of article 50 and a role in scrutiny of the Government’s plans for Brexit.

We live in a representative democracy. It is right that Members in all parts of the House, many of whom have spoken today, act for both the 52% and the 48%, as has been said today. I want the ability to speak up for the students in my constituency, the university academics, the farmers, the businesses, the NHS workers and everybody else who lives there. I agree with my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) that the Government should give urgent clarity and confirmation to EU citizens living here that they may stay. We will have the moral upper hand at the start of negotiations if we have given that clarity.

Today’s debate has shown that we should have started the debate a number of months ago. Although I might disagree with what my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) said, it is important that he has said it and we are able to debate those issues. I want a proper commitment to the plan, as we have seen, and a vote on the timetable. It is not good enough that these things are dragged out of the Government by Opposition day motions. I am pleased that it has happened, but I wish the Government were taking more of the initiative.

The Government plan can set out the high-level overall objectives. I might disagree with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) said, but he said it more clearly than I have heard it said by anybody with his beliefs. Does the Minister agree with what my right hon. Friend said? The Secretary of State was right when he said in his opening speech that “it is also important that we do not close off options before we absolutely have to.” As the Labour motion says, “there should be no disclosure of material that could be reasonably judged to damage the UK in any negotiations to depart from the European Union after Article 50 has been triggered”.

The trouble with having “no running commentary” from the Government is that it has been replaced by running commentary based on notes seen in Downing Street, ambassadors’ private conversations with the Foreign Secretary and Nissan executives’ conversations with those in Downing Street.

It is also important that we have a timetable. I have been very clear previously that I want the Government to get on with triggering article 50. I see that as the start of healing the rift between Parliament and people that we have seen result from 23 June. I do not have a problem with voting for the amendment, but I understand and respect those Members who do. I do not think it is the same as having an Act of Parliament, as the High Court ruled, and I hope the Minister will be very clear that approving the amendment is not the same as having legislation.

We are going to have a wholly new relationship with the EU on or before March 2019. We are going to have a wholly new place in the world, and I want this country to be outward-looking and forward-facing. Brexit is going to affect our economy, our foreign trade, our foreign policies, our trade policies and our immigration policy. How the Government conduct the next two years will say much about our constitution and our values as a country.

Parliament has to rise to the occasion, and I have to say that neither Front-Bench speech today quite got there. Contributions from other Members of the House have got closer to showing an appreciation of the magnitude of what we are doing. If we are going to argue solely about the process, I think we will be letting our constituents down. It is the substance of the final deal we agree with the EU, and the final trade agreements we have with the rest of the world, that will shape Britain’s place in the world.

We need Ministers—from the Prime Minister downwards—to inspire as well as engage on these issues and to be clear about what 2019 and beyond will look like for this country. I look forward to further such debates.

3.51 pm

**Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (UKIP): The Opposition motion is absolutely right about one thing: leaving the EU is indeed the defining issue for this country. As such, I urge the Government to get on with it.

As for parliamentary scrutiny, of course Parliament ought to have the ability to hold the Executive to account, but believe me, as someone who enjoys endlessly banging on about Europe, there are endless opportunities to scrutinise the Government. I suspect that the sudden surge of interest in parliamentary scrutiny is in fact about seeking to frustrate the referendum result.

Those on the Labour Front Bench have been happy for the past 20 years to use Crown prerogative to hand powers to Brussels. All of a sudden, we see the issue of parliamentary oversight being used, in effect, as a brake—a brake against taking back control, and a brake against bringing our democracy home. Once again, those on the Labour Front Bench side with the supranational élites; they are out to try to frustrate and overturn the way people voted in June. Parliamentary sovereignty is shorthand for the sovereignty of the people. The verdict of the people on 23 June was absolutely clear. It would be perverse to invoke parliamentary oversight and sovereignty as a pretext for dither and delay.

I am absolutely delighted that the Government have tabled amendment (a) and it is an honour to add my name to it. The amendment calls the bluff of those who wanted to use sophistry to frustrate Brexit. Let us stop playing these parliamentary parlour games. Today’s vote is non-binding, and I hope Ministers will shortly bring binding votes before the Commons.

Finally, some politicians’ approach to Brexit these past few months has been to regard it almost as though the people somehow made a mistake on 23 June. They
What we will now be able to do is to embrace technology. She would know that I said, “And, if appropriate, more.”

I listened to my speeches during the referendum campaign, and whether farmers or not? Should continue to give support to farmers at the levels post-Brexit—in 2019 and 2020—the UK Government Gentleman says about the CAP, but does he believe that our powers to control our fishing will restore our marine environments and fish stocks, and bring prosperity and wealth back to our most remote marine communities.

Mr Owen Paterson: The conundrum we are facing is that this is the first time in our history that the establishment and the Government of the day, having decided to have a referendum, have got a result that they disagree with. The Labour party’s 1975 referendum, and the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish referendums, all delivered a result that was satisfactory to the establishment and the majority in this House. Today, we face the opposite.

Two weeks ago, I was at the annual general meeting of my local National Farmers Union office, and a lady said to me, “What is it about London—what don’t they get? We voted to leave. Leave means leave.” As a founder member of Vote Leave, I think that we were pretty clear right throughout the campaign about what we wanted—we wanted to take back control. The Government have been pretty clear that they are going to deliver on that.

We wanted to take back control of our money. On my first day at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my Secretary of State’s briefing said that we were handing back £642 million of real money because the Commission, under the ECJ, disliked the manner in which the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) had implemented the then CAP reform. So there was I, democratically elected and responsible to this democratic House, with nothing I could do about it. This House began from the principle of deciding what taxes were and who was responsible for them, controlling the monarch of the time, and it still has that fundamental role. The people will get back their role of kicking out politicians who raise taxes and spend them badly, because we do not have that at the moment.

We voted to take back control of our laws. I know about that spades from my time at DEFRA. About 90% of DEFRA’s work is the implementation of European law. I tried manfully in negotiations to work with good allies, but we were outvoted on many occasions, and our farmers are struggling with the latest CAP reform. With many areas of activity competing strongly to be the worst, I would say that the EU’s governance of fishing wins, because it has been a catastrophe. Getting back our powers to control our fishing will restore our marine environments and fish stocks, and bring prosperity and wealth back to our most remote marine communities.

Angela Smith: I am listening to what the right hon. Gentleman says about the CAP, but does he believe that the information when they go on the production line. The EU is becoming the museum of world farming because it is so extraordinarily hostile to technology—and that also applies to fishing.

The hon. Lady has also mentioned immigration—quite rightly. The most angry people I met when I was at DEFRA were the fruit farmers in Essex, Kent and Hereford who had been deprived by the then Home Secretary, now our Prime Minister, who had stopped the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which brought in 21,250 highly skilled Romanians and Bulgarians before their countries became full members. I worked hard with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and the then Home Secretary to see how we could work our way around this. The hon. Member for Penistone and Stockbridge (Angela Smith) is absolutely right—we need a supply of skilled labour to work in our horticultural, fruit-picking and vegetable industry, and also in food processing.

At the other end of the scale, I know an eye surgeon whose family—they are Sufi Muslims—came from the United Provinces of India. She gave me, unprovoked—I have clean hands; she started it—the most extraordinary lecture attacking current immigration policy whereby she has to take less qualified, less skilled, less safe and less experienced eye surgeons because they have European passports, and she cannot choose more skilled and safer ones from Bangalore, Hong Kong or San Diego. I would like us to have the choice of the world’s workers—whether fruit packers or eye surgeons—on a permit scheme. I wholly endorse the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) because it would send out a tremendous signal if we stated here and now that there are very large numbers of EU citizens working in our economy who make an enormous contribution. We should give them, up to a certain date, the right of abode, and from then on move to a permit system.

We said that we would take back control of our ability to trade around the world. SNP Members make a huge fuss about the single market and the customs union. We have to leave the single market if we want to come out from under the cosh of the European Court of Justice. The single market does not exist anyway. My noble Friend Lord Bamford recently gave a very good speech in another place saying that there are 10 standards of brake lights on tractors within the current so-called single market. It is a non-problem. People just punch in the information when they go on the production line.

Joanna Cherry: I am interested in what the right hon. Gentleman has just said. Can he tell me why the Conservative manifesto, on which his party fought the last election, stated: “We say: yes to the Single Market?”

Mr Paterson: I am speaking for the Vote Leave campaign, which made it very clear that we would not be under the jurisdiction of the ECJ and that we would be able to make trade treaties around the world. Also—this was massively popular during the campaign—if we leave the customs union and get outside fortress Europe, the prices of everyday goods, food and clothing will come down. That will be of massive benefit to our consumers, and it is another example of why this is the establishment against the people.
The same thing is happening in Europe. We saw the results of the referendum in Italy this week, and there will soon be elections in Holland, France and Germany. Opposition Members should wake up to the phenomenon that we have allies in those countries who want what they would call an open Brexit. They want to trade with us, so we should be offering them zero for zero on tariffs.

Ilse Aigner is a senior member of the Christian Social Union in Bavaria with whom I worked extremely closely when she was the federal Agriculture Minister. Only last week, in her role as Economic Affairs Minister for Bavaria, she said to her federal counterpart, “Don’t mess up Brexit. We don’t want recession in Bavaria; we want to continue selling our products.” As well as the 17.4 million people here who voted for Brexit, we have significant interests in Europe on our side.

Quotes have been bandied about—including one that was, I think, a perversion of something that Helmuth von Moltke said—and I close with two. Napoleon, who knew a thing or two about winning battles, said:

“I never had a plan of operations”.

Carl von Clausewitz said:

“Pursue one great decisive aim with force and determination.”

Good luck to the Government; I will vote for the amendment tonight.

4.1 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): We have to face up to the fact that a growing proportion of our population have lost faith in this place and in our collective ability to address their concerns and offer them hope for a better future. Brexit was a shock-and-awe wake-up call from too many who feel that mainstream politics is broken and does not work for them. Of course, some voted against the notion of pooled sovereignty and the fear of a federal superstate, but many others registered their protest at the state of their everyday lives: stagnant wages; the loss of traditional jobs and the consequential destruction of communities caused by globalisation; the impact of migration; and horrendous continuing inequality, which is something that UKIP has no answers to.

Although many of us believed that we had too much to lose by leaving the European Union, many of our fellow citizens felt they had nothing to lose. I am not the first Member of this House to make these points, but it is astonishing that in the aftermath of the Brexit vote and at a time of alarming levels of support for far-right parties across Europe and elsewhere, mainstream parties in this House appear to have learned nothing. Until the motion was tabled, the Government thought it acceptable to keep their Brexit plans secret from not only Members of the House but the people of this country. The Lib Dems suggest that the referendum result should be overturned via a second referendum. Some senior Labour Front Benchers demonstrate contempt for those who have legitimate concerns about the pace and impact of immigration.

If we are to begin a reconnection with those who have been left behind, it is vital that we demonstrate that we get it. We must have an honest dialogue with people about the unavoidable change that will continue to take place and the difficult choices that we face.

Mr Carswell: Will the hon. Gentleman agree with UKIP’s long-standing policy by voting in favour of supporting the triggering of article 50 and leaving the European Union?

Mr Lewis: I do not think I agree with a single policy that UKIP advocates. The party is about dividing our communities and causing mayhem in terms of community cohesion. It has nothing to say about the inequality in our society.

We must have an honest dialogue with the people. The language of hard and soft—and now, apparently, red, white and blue—Brexit is meaningless to many of our constituents. The Government’s shambolic and secretive approach to our negotiating position is cutting our constituents out of some of the most crucial decisions facing the future of our country.

Only this weekend, we saw the farce of the Prime Minister’s crackdown on Brexit leaks itself being leaked—an episode worthy of “The Thick of It” and “Yes Minister” combined. My concern that we are alienating large sections of the electorate and playing into the hands of the far right is not simply about the Conservative party. I despair when I hear Labour spokespeople responding to questions about immigration with meaningless platitudes such as, “We need to talk about immigration,” or when I listen to Front Benchers who dismiss or deny voters’ legitimate concerns. We need a credible policy agenda that does not compromise our internationalist and anti-racist values, but recognises that if people do not believe in open borders, they must show how they will control and manage immigration.

It is entirely consistent to have zero tolerance for the demonisation of immigrants, while believing in the control and management of migration. It is also consistent to assert that integration is an expectation of citizenship and to be crystal clear that it is this country’s duty and in our finest traditions to be a safe haven for refugees fleeing violence and repression. None of these things is incompatible with our values, and they are not contradictory.

Finally, we must tackle the grotesque inequality that scars our society. I commend the Governor of the Bank of England for his thoughtful and challenging speech recently about the need for real change. The fact is that the combined impact of globalisation and technology will continue to threaten jobs in our country, and income inequality and stalled social mobility are forming a lethal cocktail. Frankly, this Government are making those issues worse, not better. I remain convinced that it is in our national interest for the UK to be at the heart of the European Union, but the people have spoken and we have to respect their decision. Brexit is a wake-up call that has magnified the growing division in our society. We must not only tackle grotesque levels of inequality, but do politics differently in relation to how we engage with people about the big changes that will continue to affect their lives. The “we know best” era of Government has passed, and the stakes have never been higher for the future of our country and our politics.

4.6 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis). He made an important point about
reconnecting with the electorate. I entirely agree with him that for too many years Governments have thought that they knew best and have ignored the people. For instance, they have not been willing to engage on the issue of immigration. He is also absolutely right to say that we can want controlled immigration without demonising immigrants.

It is nice to see you back in the Chair again, Mr Speaker. The fact that you are giving so much attention to this debate clearly shows that it is an important one.

I will turn to an aspect of this debate that we have not touched on completely, because it has suddenly started to be about parliamentary sovereignty. As somebody who has always defended the right of Parliament and has been concerned about the power of the Executive, hon. Members would expect me to bang on about that and say that we should have a vote in this House on article 50. In fact, I have always thought we should do so. However, the reason why the Government are right to say that they can use the royal prerogative to trigger article 50 is the unique circumstances of the referendum. This House, in an Act of Parliament, gave the British people the right to decide that question. That is why I absolutely defend the right of the Government to proceed in the way they have thought fit to proceed.

Having said that, the role of Parliament is to deal with all the issues that will come up after we have triggered the process, reflecting the fact that we want to leave the European Union. To the Government’s great credit, they are putting on a series of debate on the European Union and Brexit in which hon. Members can make their views known. When the Government go to negotiate, they will therefore know the views of Parliament. It would be totally absurd, however, for the Government to lay down their negotiating hand in advance. It would just be daft. When I was in business, I did not tell the opposition what I wanted in advance of negotiations. It would just be daft. When the Government go to negotiate, they will therefore know the views of Parliament. It would be totally absurd, however, for the Government to lay down their negotiating hand in advance. It would just be daft. When I was in business, I did not tell the opposition what I wanted in advance of negotiations. It would just be daft. When the Government go to negotiate, they will therefore know the views of Parliament.

The most important part of this debate is that we will tonight, I hope, agree a motion telling the Government to trigger article 50 by 31 March. The Supreme Court is saying that that is not enough and there has to be an Act of Parliament. The hon. Gentleman is right that it is possible, of course, that the Supreme Court will agree with the High Court and we will have an Act of Parliament. If the Supreme Court disagrees with the High Court the Government can continue the way they want to, through the royal prerogative.

That is why I have introduced my Withdrawal from the European Union (Article 50) Bill. It is two clauses long. All it does is tell the Government that by 31 March they have to trigger article 50. If that Bill goes through, we will be satisfying the High Court. That Bill will get its Second Reading on 16 December unless anyone objects to it. It will then go into Committee to be discussed and come back to the House on Report. By the time it comes back to the House for Third Reading, the Supreme Court will have given its decision.

Mr MacNeil: The High Court.

Mr Bone: Quite right—that is what the High Court has said. It is possible, of course, that the Supreme Court will agree with the High Court and we will have to have an Act of Parliament, although if the Supreme Court disagrees with the High Court the Government can continue the way they want to, through the royal prerogative.

Mr Bone: The narrow point I am dealing with is the triggering of article 50, which I say has been authorised by the British people. The High Court disagrees. If the Supreme Court endorses that view, we will have to have an Act of Parliament. The hon. Gentleman is right that there are very many things to be negotiated and dealt with afterwards, and they have to come before this House. It has been quite a surprise to me that some Members who have suddenly found that they greatly support parliamentary sovereignty are ex-Ministers and ex-Whips who used to have no time for this place when they were in government. A sinner repenting is wonderful, but—

Anna Soubry: Name names!

Mr Bone: My right hon. Friend the Member for—[Interruption.] [Mr Bone]: “Broxtowe!”] My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). It is a juxtaposition for very many people. It is great that people now believe in this place. We should absolutely do what the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) says, and scrutinise the Government as they go through the Brexit process.

Michael Gove: May I say, just for the record, that as Chief Whip I had a number of dealings with my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and she was always vigorously resistant to whipping and the imposition of parliamentary discipline? She remains on the Back Benches, as she was in the ministerial team, a feisty and independent voice whom we should all respect.

Mr Bone: I am always glad to be corrected by a former Chief Whip. What my right hon. Friend said is undoubtedly the case.

The important part here is very simple. Tonight we will, I hope, pass a motion that authorises the Government to invoke article 50. [Interruption.] That is what it says. [Interruption.] There is debate about that. Given that there is that debate, the only certainty is through having an Act of Parliament. I therefore look forward to my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe and others being here on 16 December to support my Bill—if anyone wants a copy, I have a few spares—because it would satisfy all the Court’s requirements.

The important thing about today is that it is Parliament that is dealing with the matter. It is not a Government motion on the Order Paper but an Opposition one. It is not a Government Bill going through but a private Member’s Bill. It is clearly Parliament speaking. I therefore hope that tonight the amendment and the motion are agreed and we can move forward, and then, in about 10 days’ time, we can give Second Reading to what this House wants: to trigger article 50.
4.13 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). I simply make the point to him that the negotiations that the Government are involved in are a good deal more complicated than any business negotiation he may have been involved in in the past; simplifying things to that level does not really do justice to the scale of the problem.

I have two points to make. The first concerns the process of negotiation itself. The second is to do with the incoherence of the Government’s position.

Before I address those two points, I should say that, although I campaigned to remain in the EU, I accept that the public have spoken and that their view has to be respected. My constituency voted in almost exactly the same way as the national referendum result—narrowly in favour of leaving. Close as it was, I frankly cannot see any democratic way of setting that result aside, and Parliament should respect it regardless of any court decision. If the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) was still in his place, I would say to him that that is not lip service; it is a serious statement, by almost every Member, about where we stand.

My first point is that it is important that the Government’s negotiations lead to the best possible outcome in terms of our jobs, economic prosperity, security co-operation and continuing engagement with Europe from outside the EU. I find it odd that the Government have so far been unable to give a clear account of the principles that will frame the negotiations. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) brought that point out very well.

I recently relinquished my membership of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I served on it for over 11 years, so I do understand that, in some circumstances, the state does have to have secrets—for example, on how our intelligence and security agencies work and their capabilities. However, the principles and objectives that govern our Brexit negotiations are the most urgent matter we have confronted in decades. They are an urgent matter of public policy that should be properly debated at every point along the way by this House. It surely follows that, on behalf of the people we represent, we should have an influence on those principles and objectives before anybody concludes the negotiations.

That brings me on to my second point. I am not at all clear whether the Government are committed to a so-called hard Brexit or a soft Brexit. Indeed, we now have two new additions to the terminology: a grey Brexit and a red, white and blue Brexit. I hope the new objective will be a least-damage Brexit. To simplify it, I accept that in terms of trade and the economic impact of leaving we need to get the best possible terms. In reality, soft Brexit means continuing access to the single market, or, at the very least, access to the customs union. However, how that can happen is becoming increasingly incoherent. Strangely, some Ministers—most notably the Secretary of State—are even talking about having to pay for access. I am sure that that would, understandably, cause outrage even among those who, like me, voted to remain.

What I am about to say may not please many people, but it is politically naïve to believe that continued access to the single market or the customs union, without corresponding concessions on the free movement of labour, could be possible. I ask hon. Members to put themselves in the shoes of Angela Merkel or the next President of France as they go back to their countries and say, “Well, we’ve given the UK all the economic concessions and we’ve let them off the hook on the free movement of labour.” That just is not likely.

I accept that we have to have a route map for negotiations and I accept that this is not straightforward—I have already said as much. It cannot be the case, however, that, as a democratically elected Parliament, we can be expected to have no say whatever in the determination of the principles and objectives of those negotiations. I support the amendment to the Opposition motion, but only as a first instalment along that road.

4.18 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth). I endorse in particular his opening remarks. Like him, I am getting somewhat tired of the constant abuse and constant criticism that somehow we are remoaners who want to thwart the will of the people, that we do not accept the result and want to go back on it. We absolutely do accept the result. I do not like the result—yes, I believe the people made a terrible mistake—but I said publicly, as did the right hon. Gentleman, that we would accept and honour the result. We said to people, “If you vote leave, you will get leave.” Would everyone please finally understand and accept that, so that we can move on to the most important thing, which is how we get the very best deal for our country?

I gently say to the Secretary of State, who is no longer in his seat, that he should not be almost deriding me for working with people who sit over there on the Labour Benches, or further down the Benches opposite, or even with the Lib Dems—if any of them are going to take part, which I hope they might. [Interruption.] I am looking forward to their one contribution, from the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake). The point is that the Secretary of State should not be criticising me for working with others on this most important of all matters—the most important for a generation and more I would say. When he sat on the Back Benches, of course, he was very happy and willing to work with right hon. and hon. Members opposite on the things that were important to him, and rightly so. This transcends party politics and tribalism.

Most importantly, now is the time for our country to come together. Make no mistake: families and friends are still divided. In my county, as I have said before, levels of hate crime remain 18% higher than this time last year. The way we begin to heal, build bridges and restore our communities, friendships and families is to include that 48% who voted to remain. To be honest, many of them—I include myself—have understandably felt sidelined and ignored and experienced the weight of abuse, whether online or in other places, and we are sick and tired of it. We are entitled to our opinion and we are entitled to express it.

We reach out and say, “We now want to work together with anybody—frankly—in order to get the best deal”. This is not just about my generation. As I enter my seventh decade—[Hon. Members: “No!”] Today’s the day. Moving swiftly on, I nearly said, “Everybody’s invited to the party”, but that’s another matter. In all
seriousness, it is not about my generation. The decisions we make now will resonate for decades to come and for generations now and in the future, so it is important we get it right, and it is important that we remember those youngsters. The majority of them voted to remain, and the honest truth is that many feel that an older generation has stolen their future. We have got to wake up and recognise that. I remind all hon. Members that the 16 and 17-year-olds of today will be their voters in 2020.

As ever, I am running out of time. I just want to say, in response to the excellent and wise words of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), that I struggle with the concept that we cannot debate these really important matters. With great respect to him, he says that we are leaving the customs union, but are we? Businesses and trade organisations in my constituency want certainty, they want to have a say and they want the right to shape what is best for business and our future.

Stephen Doughty: rose—

Anna Soubry: Ooh, I will give way. I will get an extra minute.

Stephen Doughty: It is true that the right hon. Lady has been willing to work across the House on crucial issues, as on the steel industry, on which I was pleased to work with her. She is making the right point about what is best for jobs, businesses, organisations, individuals and universities in our constituencies. That is what many of us are arguing for and what we want answers on, because those are the questions our constituents are asking.

Anna Soubry: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Businesses and trade organisations in my constituency want certainty and transitional arrangements. Universities and others who employ migrant workers are saying, “What is your new immigration policy going to be, and how do we make sure we have the workers we need?” It is not politically correct to say this, but it is in the interests of British business and workers that we have migrant workers. It is they who make British business so good and who make us the fifth-strongest economy.

Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con) rose—

Anna Soubry: I will not get another minute, but I will give way very quickly.

Claire Perry: I just wanted to say this to my right hon. Friend: would it not be the best possible birthday present for her if the House genuinely came together tonight, went through the Lobby in support of the Labour motion and our Government amendment, and showed the country that we can come together for something so important? We are not remainers; we are bring-it-on Brexiteers.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful for that comment and all that my hon. Friend says. I want to say this gently to the Government. I will vote for this, but I am nervous and concerned. On 12 October, this place agreed, without Division, that we would have a series of debates and we would scrutinise the Government’s plans. Thus far, we have had two debates. The first was on workers’ rights. I know they are important, but frankly that is a red herring—no pun intended—because the Government have made it absolutely clear, and I take the Secretary of State and our Prime Minister absolutely at their word, that workers’ rights will remain entrenched in British law. Truly it is not a great issue.

The second debate was on that grave and weighty matter, “Transport and Brexit”. I am sorry, but this is not good enough. The debates we now need to have are about the value of the single market—let us thrash it out and hear why some say we should not be in it. Let us talk about the customs union and the peril of tariffs. Let us talk about immigration—the positive benefits of it, and some of the downsides, but let us have these debates and, most importantly, let us take part in that in Parliament. We speak for our constituents. We speak for the people.

Let no one use tonight’s motion and any vote when it comes to the proceedings in the Supreme Court. I want a White Paper. I want legislation. I want to go through the Lobby and make a difference on our relationship with the EU, to secure a strong future for everybody for generations to come.

4.26 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who has been incredibly brave and, as a result of her courage, has faced hideous threats. I am sure that the whole House will want to wish her a happy birthday.

I shall try to focus my remarks on the motion and the Government amendment. I fully support Labour’s motion, but for the same reasons as my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), I cannot support the Government amendment. In effect, it gives a blank cheque for us to invoke article 50 by March without any of us being any the wiser about the Government’s intentions today.

The Government promise to publish a plan, but it has been clear to me from Government statements and from statements of Conservative Members outside this Chamber in the last 24 hours that that plan will not be the White Paper that the Brexit Secretary once promised. It will not answer the big questions about our vital access to the single market, the rights of UK citizens abroad and EU citizens here, or issues such as tariffs. All the signals from the Prime Minister’s speech to her party conference and since have been that the majority of the Government want and are heading for a hard Brexit. In my view, that would be disastrous for jobs and prosperity in my constituency.

In the Labour party conference just a couple of months ago, we agreed as a party:

“Unless the final settlement proves to be acceptable, then the option of retaining EU membership should be retained. The final settlement should therefore be subject to approval, through Parliament and potentially through a general election or referendum.”

I accept that that does not specifically mention article 50, but it is surely explicit that, unless we start arguing now that article 50 is reversible, we should not support its invocation without having any confidence that the Government’s Brexit would be acceptable—and I have no such confidence.
I also happen to believe that the timescale that the Government have imposed on themselves is unnecessary, unrealistic and unwise. Michel Barnier, the EU’s chief negotiator, said yesterday that it would be completed in 18 months, but the French and German elections mean that no meaningful talks will happen until the autumn of next year. Under the current plan, the talks will have to be completed within 12 months—the most complicated negotiations that this country has ever faced completed in just 12 months.

Geraint Davies: Given that the French and the German elections provide a case to delay article 50 and given that we can only negotiate before article 50—because, afterwards, we just give in our membership card and the Government decide—does my right hon. Friend agree that we should delay article 50 until November and then perhaps have a referendum on it?

Mr Bradshaw: I do not agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said, but I do think it would make sense for the Government to delay the invocation of article 50 until after the German elections, to give themselves more time to secure a good deal.

The Government have prayed in aid a motion that was agreed by the House, without a Division, on 12 October. The Secretary of State for Brexit prayed it in aid in his speech as well, without making clear that it had said nothing about a March deadline. It is worth my putting that motion on the record. It said: “this House recognises that leaving the EU is the defining issue facing the UK; believes that there should be a full and transparent debate on the Government’s plan for leaving the EU; and calls on the Prime Minister to ensure that this House is able properly to scrutinise that plan for leaving the EU before Article 50 is invoked”.

There was nothing in the motion about a 31 March deadline. It was completely different from today’s Government amendment.

It is relatively easy for me, as one who represents a “remain” seat, to oppose the Government in the Division Lobby tonight, but all of us, as Members of Parliament, are called upon to exercise our judgment on what we believe to be in the best interests of our constituents and the nation. I am afraid that I will not submit myself to a straitjacket of a timetable—an artificial timetable—to suit the Conservative party and deal with its internal problems when that would not be in the national interest, which is why I will oppose the Government amendment tonight.

4.31 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): As the Member of Parliament for a constituency that voted narrowly to remain, I have felt ever since the summer that my task is to help my colleagues in the Government to achieve Brexit in a manner that is satisfactory and will lead to the best possible outcome for everyone in the country, and today that is still exactly what I want to do. The difficulty, as I see it, is that what we have heard over the last two months in particular—the vitriolic abuse, the polemical argument without any substance, and the ignorance of some of the basic ABC of our constitution—has reached a point at which I sit in the Chamber and listen to utterances that border on the completely paranoid. The nadir, for me, was to sit one evening and hear a Minister of the Crown—not one of those who are on the Front Bench today—say that one of the Queen’s subjects who was seeking to assert her legal rights in the Queen’s courts, and who was, I might add, subjected to death threats as a result, was doing something, or had achieved something, that was unacceptable. If we continue like this, we are on the road to a very bad place.

In my opinion, while my duty as a Member of Parliament is to seek to uphold Brexit and help the Government to achieve it, that does not mean that I must suspend all judgment. On the contrary, we have a clear responsibility to scrutinise legislation, to ask awkward questions, to express our views and, if necessary, to intervene in the process if we think it is going off the rails to such an extent that it is no longer in the national interest. That is why I felt frustrated by the Government’s apparent refusal to come up with a coherent plan.

When article 50 is triggered, we shall be embarking on a process which, in reality, the Government themselves will have great difficulty in controlling. I certainly do not take the view that it is the duty of the House to micromanage the Government, and it has certainly never occurred to me that we should lay down prescriptive rules for what the Government should be trying to achieve, along the lines feared, I think, by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). I do not think that that is realistic. However, I do think we are entitled to know what the Government are intending to achieve, in broad terms, so that we can debate it and influence it. Some Members may then have to accept that they are in a small minority in respect of some of the legitimate issues that we can debate within the parameters of Brexit itself, and then help to sustain the Government as they go ahead with their work. The fact that the Government have that mandate and have the approval of the House, will, in my view, help them immeasurably in their negotiations.

Sir Oliver Letwin: My right hon. and learned Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that if this House and the other place sought to amend the triggering legislation, that would have the effect of making the mandate justiciable?

Mr Grieve: It depends on whether we were seeking to limit the mandate in carrying out amendments. As I have not seen what the Government are proposing by way of primary legislation, I have no idea to what extent it might or might not be amendable, but it certainly would not have crossed my mind that one of the sorts of amendments I should produce would involve creating justiciable targets. I think my right hon. Friend knows me well enough from my time as a Law Officer to know that my views about declaratory legislation and targets are probably fairly unprintable—and certainly unutterable in this Chamber—and I do not recommend it to anybody.

On the question of where we are going after that and considering the issues around Brexit, I simply point out that some of the things said, even today by Government Members who I respect, seem to me to be rather fanciful. We have heard a lot about the sovereignty issue requiring us to withdraw from the European Court of Justice. I have to gently point out that if we are going to stay within the mechanisms of justice and security, which the Secretary of State said he believed was in the national interest, although our withdrawal from the EU...
will mean we will no longer be subject to the direct
effect of the ECJ, decisions of the ECJ on interpreting
the treaty will continue potentially to have force on us in
this country. That is not surprising because we are
signed up to over 800 international treaties which have
arbitral mechanisms for resolving disputes.
So unless we start getting out of this fantasy element
about Europe as a pariah entity, we are not going to
start getting down to a realistic assessment of what it is
about Europe as a pariah entity, we are not going to
arbitral mechanisms for resolving disputes.

Mr Grieve: It is indeed a fundamental change, and I
am delighted my hon. Friend is pleased and that appeals
to him, but I have to say this from listening to some of
the things said this afternoon: the logic of what my
right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford
Green (Mr Duncan Smith) in particular was saying was that
we would have to withdraw from all the 800 treaties
that were subject to any arbitral mechanism because
they undermined our sovereignty. This is the kind of
issue in debate we have got to start to sort out, because
the public out there expect us at least to have some
dergree of expertise about what we are actually trying to
do, and to go and explain it against the background, as
I said earlier, of vitriolic abuse against anybody who is
prepared to raise their voice to put forward any argument
that appears to be counter to the fantastical vision some
have created out of our leaving the EU.

Another example is the situation with regard to the
WTO. I may be wrong but I think joining, or rejoining,
the WTO requires a negotiation with 163 countries,
including an agreement with the EU.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Will my right
hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Grieve: I will not give way as I must finish.

So that WTO negotiation will also be a matter of
great complexity.

The one thing I am satisfied we are not doing tonight
is validating the triggering of article 50 without more
debate. First, it is quite likely that we will have to do it
by way of primary legislation, but even if we do not, the
Government would be wise to come back to this House
and get the endorsement, as they would be entitled to
do, once they have engaged in the type of debate that
will enhance this House’s reputation and help us to do
our jobs properly.

4.38 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is a genuine
pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member
for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who has made a
characteristically thoughtful and informed speech.

This is the first occasion on which I have made a
speech on the subject of the EU since the referendum. I
have stayed away from previous debates in this Chamber
because I felt conflicted—conflicted by my personal
views and political instincts, and conflicted by my
constituency’s large vote to remain and my country’s
narrow vote to leave. I was a fervent campaigner for
remain, and I believe that the British public were failed
in the referendum by an exaggerated and embarrassing
debate. I deeply regret my own failure as the then
Shadow Health Secretary to expose the lie that Brexit
would automatically mean more cash for the NHS. But
we are where we are: 16 million people voted to remain,
17 million voted to leave, and 13 million people who
could have voted chose not to do so.

I stand by my long-held view that leaving the EU
will be economically harmful, socially divisive and
fundamentally detrimental to our country’s relationships
with its closest neighbours. If I could see a positive way
through this that would respect the referendum result
and leave our country economically and socially stronger,
I would grasp it, but at the moment I cannot. On that
basis, I cannot see how I could vote to trigger article 50
without a credible plan setting out the Government’s
approach to the negotiations, their high-level aspirations
and the process that will be in place thereafter. The
strength of the plan is critical, and I will not sign up to
an arbitrary timetable set by the Government to placate
their own Back Benchers.

We need basic answers to basic questions. Is the
Government’s ultimate priority continued tariff-free access
to the single market or an end to freedom of movement?
They might wish to keep up the pretence that they can
have both, but the mood music from Europe suggests
otherwise. Tariff-free trade with the EU has to be the
priority, and if that means we have to accept immigration
from within the EU, so be it.

Mr Lilley: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Heidi Alexander: I will not give way. I have come here
to set out my position, and that is what I will do. If
retaining tariff-free trade with the EU means that we
have to pay significant sums to access the single market,
so be it. Would this be a better arrangement than we
have at present? Good question. So yes, I support a
second referendum on the terms of leaving the EU.

The reason that we are trying to conjure up a positive
economic future for our country outside the EU is to
deal with the issue of immigration. I accept that a good
number of the people who voted in June to leave the EU
did so because they wanted to control or reduce
immigration. I understand that when decent jobs and
decent homes are scarce and public services are under
pressure, some people look around for someone to
blame, but although it might be unpopular, I say that we
are going to need immigration for some time to come.
We are not having enough babies, and we have not been
for decades. I am a 41-year-old woman without children.
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I would also say that if anyone thinks we should extend the system we apply to immigrants from outside the EU to those from within it, we should be honest and admit that we would be expanding a broken system that causes sclerosis in the economy because of the turgid way in which immigration applications are processed and that exerts no control over people who overstay their visas. However, my fundamental concern about prioritising immigration over all else is that we run the risk of whipping up even more of the intolerance, division and—and let us be honest—hatred that we saw in the referendum campaign.

4.43 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I come to this debate straight after returning from the United States, where I have spent three days meeting Congressmen, and I can say that the remarks made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) are absolutely right. There is terrific support in Congress for a free trade deal between the United Kingdom and the United States, and that view is shared by the President-elect. There is a terrific world of opportunity out there as we view our emerging role in the world.

Last week at Chatham House, the Foreign Secretary gave the first in a series of speeches outlining our global role. I recommend it to right hon. and hon. Members because it should lift their eyes from the rather parochial preoccupation with the British plan. The point that I was trying to make in my intervention on the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), was not that I somehow think that Europeans are the enemy. Of course I do not, and anyone who knows me knows that I do not believe that. I was making a graphic point about the reality.

I do not see any particular difficulty in discerning the key elements of the British plan. I heard nothing from Opposition Members or anyone else to suggest that we should not be taking back sovereign control of immigration, which was a key issue in the vote. That does not have any implications for what immigration policy will mean, but the idea that this process of leaving the European Union will end without this House having sovereign control of immigration is for the birds. Everyone understands that, but that result has implications.

We have heard in recent days from Michel Barnier and from the German Chancellor, who have made it perfectly clear that we will not be allowed to cherry-pick our relationship with the European Union. This is where we come to the key element in the negotiations. Were we to cherry-pick, we would of course want full access to the single market on current terms and sovereign control over immigration, but we would not want to pay into the budget or to have the European Court of Justice overseeing our courts. There is room to manoeuvre in all this, such as around money and what items in the relationship we might think it appropriate for the ECJ to adjudicate on, but my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) made the point that that relationship would be different from the one we have now.

The problem in the negotiation lies not on our side; the 27 states have an immensely difficult task. Their interests lie in the continuation of the closest possible relationship with the United Kingdom. Their interests are in our making sense of a continued British engagement in the EU’s common foreign and security policy. Ireland’s interests are absolutely engaged in this discussion. A difficult deal for the United Kingdom is a catastrophic deal for the Republic of Ireland.

Mr MacNeil: I met the Irish Foreign Minister this morning, and one of the concerns that I left with was the possibility of Northern Ireland being encircled by the sea and a hard border. That is a real possibility, particularly if we end up on WTO terms, because there is no plan from any side to say that that would be dealt with in the island of Ireland.

Crispin Blunt: The hon. Gentleman, who now chairs the International Trade Committee, will be out of work if we remain in the customs union on the same basis, so the fact that he has a Department to oversee sends a firm signal that we are going to be negotiating our own trade agreements.

Mr Grieve: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. However, the principal nations of the EU, which are facing populist insurgencies in their politics, are anxious about the message that is sent. If the UK gets a really good deal, that will encourage other movements to seek the same arrangements for themselves. They have an explicit choice to make between their interests, which with the current balance of trade are to continue trading with the UK as we are, and the political message that might be sent.

Mr Grieve: I agree with my hon. Friend’s analysis, but is it not also the case that the whole negotiating thing is about human relations, and the difficulty that we face at the moment is that the message we put out to our European partners is deeply offensive, which is going to make securing our deal with them much harder?

Crispin Blunt: My right hon. and learned Friend is, of course, absolutely right. We have to try to take the temperature down, which is why people should not exploit it when I may have said something inadvertently and I was actually saying something totally different. We are talking about our allies—most of them allies within NATO—and, in the words of the Foreign Secretary, we need to be a “flying buttress” to the future of the European Union from the outside. One reason I supported Brexit is my belief that the UK will have a much happier relationship with the nations of the EU by being outside and having engaged their support, rather than by having to fight battles as our interests diverge from those of the states that had the currency. We could see that that was going to happen over the decades. Our country has taken this decision in its medium and long-term interests, and it should be seen in that guise. It is on the other side
of the table that the principal negotiating challenge sits, as the 27 nations have to reconcile all this. My right hon. and learned Friend may say that the interpretation of positions from here is difficult, but Mr Barnier and Chancellor Merkel made a mistake in rejecting the reciprocal arrangement to try to address the situation of EU citizens here and UK citizens there, and in saying that nothing must be agreed until everything is agreed. That has played into the British position, which is helpful, as we have very much to offer the EU and it needs—

Mr Speaker: Order.

4.51 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): The sad context for today’s debate is that far from coming back together as a country since the referendum, we are probably more divided than ever. The blame for that lies not with the public, but with the way in which Parliament and the Government have responded in the six months since. In the referendum, the public were issuing a sharp rebuke to the political class, which they feel does not listen to them and is not straight with them, but what has the Government’s response been? They have been saying that they want to keep the citizens of this country in the dark about their plans for Brexit so as not to give anything away to the other side—or, as the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) said, “the enemy”. That is simply unacceptable. In these anti-politics times, it is hard to imagine a more politically inept approach.

Crispin Blunt: Let me just correct that. I did not say that they are the enemy and I made it crystal clear in the speech I have just given that that is not my position. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to wind the temperature up in this debate, he can go on like that, but I suggest that everyone should try to calm it.

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman used the phrase “the enemy” and he needs to clarify what he meant by that. I do not think it helped to raise the tone of this debate.

The Government’s politically inept approach of saying that they can keep the public in the dark has, first, bred suspicion among remain and leave voters alike, making them think a fix is going on. Secondly, it has cast the negotiation in an unnecessarily aggressive light and has fuelled even more bad feeling towards Britain among its EU partners, in turn meaning that it will now be more difficult to get a favourable deal once article 50 has been triggered. At the moment, we are not getting a hard Brexit or a soft Brexit, but a botched Brexit. For all our sakes, the Government need to get their act together, which is why I congratulate my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on forcing their hand.

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I agree with my right hon. Friend that it is certainly not xenophobic or racist to call out unscrupulous employers who are causing some of the problems in our working-class areas by allowing the undercutting of wages, which is causing resentment from people who work in traditional industries such as the construction sector. Is not that what we really need to understand? We hear it constantly on the doorstep.

Andy Burnham: That is precisely the issue that neither Europe nor, let us be honest, this Parliament was addressing. Free movement was being used to undermine skilled wages and we did not do enough about it. We have to be honest about that.

People in my constituency want to continue to welcome people here who contribute to our society, but they want an immigration system that affords greater control voters, voted for change on immigration. I am clear about that, and it has to be our starting point in this debate. The status quo—full free movement—was defeated at the ballot box, so it is not an option. What is to be debated is the precise nature of the changes that replace it, so that we get the balance right between responding properly to the public’s legitimate concerns and minimising the impact on our economy.

Callum McCaig: The right hon. Gentleman’s party is suggesting that leaving the customs union was not on the ballot paper, so how come free movement of people was on the ballot paper? It simply was not. The ballot paper asked whether we should leave the EU or not.

Andy Burnham: I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he speaks to the public and listens to what they had to say during the referendum campaign. If he is saying that they were not voting for change on free movement and immigration, I am afraid that he simply was not listening to them.

I have long argued for a change in the system of free movement to reflect people’s concerns. As it stands, it is not working for the more deprived parts of our country, particularly those where traditional industry has been replaced by lower-skill, lower-wage employment. My preference was to work within the EU to fix those problems, but the country, understandably, lost patience with that approach.

Free movement does not affect all places in the same way; it affects cities differently from former industrial areas. It has also made life more difficult in places where it is already hardest. These are areas that got no real hope from the Government when traditional industry left and that saw how prices collapse and whole streets bought up by absent private landlords. They are places that, alongside taking new arrivals from the EU, continue to take in the vast majority of this country’s asylum seekers and refugees. Largely they do so without any real strife or difficulty, so I do not want to hear anyone claim that people in places such as Leigh who voted to leave are in any way xenophobic or racist. They are welcoming, generous people, but they also want fairness, and they do not think that it is fair that the country’s least well-off communities should expect pressure on wages, housing, public services, primary schools and GP services without any help to manage it.

Crispin Blunt: The right hon. Gentleman is suggesting that he voted to leave, many of them lifelong Labour voters, voted for change on immigration. I am clear about that, and it has to be our starting point in this debate. The status quo—full free movement—was defeated at the ballot box, so it is not an option. What is to be debated is the precise nature of the changes that replace it, so that we get the balance right between responding properly to the public’s legitimate concerns and minimising the impact on our economy.

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I have long argued for a change in the system of free movement to reflect people’s concerns. As it stands, it is not working for the more deprived parts of our country, particularly those where traditional industry has been replaced by lower-skill, lower-wage employment. My preference was to work within the EU to fix those problems, but the country, understandably, lost patience with that approach.

Free movement does not affect all places in the same way; it affects cities differently from former industrial areas. It has also made life more difficult in places where it is already hardest. These are areas that got no real hope from the Government when traditional industry left and that saw how prices collapse and whole streets bought up by absent private landlords. They are places that, alongside taking new arrivals from the EU, continue to take in the vast majority of this country’s asylum seekers and refugees. Largely they do so without any real strife or difficulty, so I do not want to hear anyone claim that people in places such as Leigh who voted to leave are in any way xenophobic or racist. They are welcoming, generous people, but they also want fairness, and they do not think that it is fair that the country’s least well-off communities should expect pressure on wages, housing, public services, primary schools and GP services without any help to manage it.

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I agree with my right hon. Friend that it is certainly not xenophobic or racist to call out unscrupulous employers who are causing some of the problems in our working-class areas by allowing the undercutting of wages, which is causing resentment from people who work in traditional industries such as the construction sector. Is not that what we really need to understand? We hear it constantly on the doorstep.

Andy Burnham: That is precisely the issue that neither Europe nor, let us be honest, this Parliament was addressing. Free movement was being used to undermine skilled wages and we did not do enough about it. We have to be honest about that.

People in my constituency want to continue to welcome people here who contribute to our society, but they want an immigration system that affords greater control
and reduces the numbers. I believe that that is what we must work towards. The left across Europe has got to break out of its paralysis on this issue. The fear of being labelled as "pandering" stops people entering the debate, but it also stops progressive ideas that meet the public's concerns and leaves the pitch clear for those with right-wing solutions.

I want to set out two principal reasons why there is a legitimate left-wing case for reform. First, in an era of increasing globalisation, free movement has arguably been providing greater benefit to large companies than it has to the most deprived communities. There is nothing socialist about a system of open borders that allows multinationals to treat people as commodities and to move them around Europe to drive down labour costs and create a race to the bottom.

Secondly, there is a strong case for saying that the immigration system that has developed over time in this country is inherently discriminatory—it does not treat all migrants equally. Instead, it accords a preferential status to migrants from our nearest neighbours in the context of a policy that seeks to cap numbers. That, therefore, discriminates against those non-EU migrants who seek to come here and who have families here.

My call to this side of the House is to put forward a plan that treats all people equally and that applies progressive principles to migration. We need to make the argument for an immigration system that allows greater control and that reduces the numbers coming here, but that does so in a fair way. This would be a system that treats all migrants equally, that does not allow people's wages to be undercut, as my hon. Friend said, and, crucially, that continues to welcome people from Europe and around the world to work here. Those are progressive principles that can form the basis of a new immigration policy for the left.

It is time for many of us on this side of the House to confront a hard truth: our reluctance in confronting this debate is undermining the cohesion of our communities and the safety of our streets. I am no longer prepared to be complicit in that. We need answers to the public's concerns, but answers that are based on hope, not hate.

4.59 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I found the speech by the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) rather refreshing. I submit that democracy is an awesome thing. When the tide turns in the minds of the voters, it is refreshing to see their democratically elected representatives turning as well. I wish him well in advancing a humane case for a humane and sensible immigration policy.

We have to acknowledge that this is a fraught moment—for some, it is painful—in our history, as the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) demonstrated. We need to take on board the points made about healing divisions and adopting the right tone. The House should look at the continuum of our history: a whole millennium of this nation. Our successors will look back on this short period in which we were a member of the EU very differently. We have been in this organisation for only 43 years, which is a tiny span of our history. We debate it hotly now, but all the controversy will pass, and we will look back with much more equanimity than we feel today.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that as we bring the country together it is important that people do not look for possible or imaginary problems, because we want the strongest possible position to negotiate the best possible answer for the country, and we need to unite to do so?

Mr Jenkin: I wholly agree with my right hon. Friend. The Latin monetary union was formed in 1865 in Europe and lasted for 62 years, but has been completely forgotten. It is never discussed. It time and went, and I think that we will come to see our EU membership, barely longer than a generation, in the same way.

There are two aspects to the motion. First, the Government will produce a plan—we all agree about that now. I do not think it came as a surprise that the Government conceded that not only would it be beneficial, but it seems that most Members will vote for the invokation of article 50 by 31 March 2017. We can demonstrate to the country that there is a great measure of consensus, but it prompts the question why there is a court case, and why the courts have chosen to become involved, particularly once the motion is carried. We do not need a court to tell the House that it is sovereign. The House could stop Brexit whenever it wanted, as it could stop anything else that a Government do if it chose to do so. It is unfortunate that a different kind of judiciary is developing, as I do not think that Parliament ever voted for that. We await the outcome of the Supreme Court ruling with respect and great interest to see if that is the kind of judiciary that we want.

Mr MacNeil: Does the hon. Gentleman share concerns about the headlong rush to trigger article 50? Given that there may be 12 months of negotiations, if there is no deal in place the UK might find itself trading under WTO conditions which are not beneficial, particularly in the agricultural sector but also in a whole host of other activities. Has he thought about the consequences? I think that industry is not suitably engaged and is not demanding from Government the conditions in which it wants the UK to trade after 2019.

Mr Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman will find that a great deal of industry is quietly preparing for the possibility that there will not be an agreement. It is much more adaptable than many of us in the House. It is much more able to deal with change than many of us in government. What we are seeking in the plan is less complexity and less uncertainty, because that is what preoccupies people. Some people are talking up the complexity—some people want more uncertainty—to try to make a point. However, we have an opportunity in the plan to have less complexity and less uncertainty. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) made it clear that the Prime Minister has cleared up a great deal of uncertainty, but that many in the opposition choose not to hear.

As for the aim of the article 50 agreement, it should be to put as little in the agreement as possible. If we want an agreement, let us not overload the process. Let us keep to the bare minimum. Let us try to shorten the timeframe. I was encouraged that Michael Barnier, the negotiator at the European Commission, wants to shorten the period of negotiations. Perhaps the European Commission is beginning to feel the pressure from
business and people outside politics who want us to get on with this process, not drag it out and make it take 10 years or some of the more ridiculous suggestions.

We should be in a position to make a generous offer in our opening bid, which I expect to be included in the White Paper. It is worth reminding ourselves what the treaties invite the EU to do. Article 8 of the treaty on European Union states:

“The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity”.

The EU should read its own treaties before it starts its negotiation. Article 3.5 says that in its relations with the wider world, the EU “shall contribute to peace, security . . . mutual respect among peoples” and “free and fair trade”.

Our opening pitch should be very simple. We should make an offer—a zero/zero offer: we will give EU countries zero tariffs on their exports to our country, if they will give us zero tariffs on their imports from us. That is in everyone’s interest. It is in the interest of jobs on the continent and in the United Kingdom.

We should also offer an opportunity for mutual recognition of services agreements, so that we can continue trading in services, as we do now. That, again, would be in everybody’s interest. We want the European Union to have access to the global financial capital and we want to be able to trade in the European Union in the same way. Of course we will offer continued co-operation, as the Secretary of State said, in justice and home affairs, security and defence, and foreign policy. We want to be the good neighbours.

Finally, the repeal Bill can be simple, unless people choose to make it complicated to try to carry on scoring points. The European Communities Act is a few clauses long. We need a repeal Bill of only a few clauses, setting out the principles by which we leave. It is worth reminding ourselves that the Czech Republic and Slovakia were one country and within six months of deciding to split, they split, and they are better friends now than they ever were before. That is the kind of relationship that I look forward to having with our European partners. Let us move it along quickly. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will do a quicker deal and offer a quick Brexit in everyone’s interests, to reduce the uncertainty and keep things simple.

5.6 pm

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) asked what kind of judiciary we want. Well, we want a judiciary that is independent and will not be brow-beaten by the likes of the Daily Mail.

We should thank Labour for initiating this debate today. When the Leader of the House, standing in at Prime Minister’s questions, was asked about this, he took credit on behalf of the Government for the debate taking place today. The Government cannot share the credit for this debate, although they should, of course, have initiated such a debate in their own time.

Labour may take some satisfaction from securing from the Prime Minister a promise to publish a rather sketchy plan before article 50 is invoked, but in the words of the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), this is thin gruel. How many hours before article 50 is invoked will the plan be published? Will there be any time to debate it, challenge the Government on it or vote on it? Will the plan be a White Paper or a Green Paper? Will it amount to anything more than “Brexit means Brexit”, “no running commentary” and now “a red, white and blue Brexit”, another meaningless phrase to add to the lexicon of Brexit platitudes that masquerade as policy?

Where is the guarantee that the people will be able to vote on the destination as well as the departure? The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said in his speech earlier that destination and departure are the same thing. I do not know about him, but when I catch a train, I do not arrive at the same place at the end of my journey. Why do people need a vote on the destination as well as on the departure? Because whatever rough outline of a deal the Government manage to secure towards the end of the two years of negotiations after article 50 has been invoked, we can be certain that a majority will not be happy. The 48% clearly will not be happy, what of the 52%?

**John Redwood:** Has the right hon. Gentleman taken the trouble to listen to the statements, to come to the several debates that the Government have put on and to read the Prime Minister’s very full speech on the subject at the party conference and all the other statements that made it very clear what our negotiating aim is—good access to the single market and the freedom of this country back again.

**Tom Brake:** No doubt that is the position that the right hon. Gentleman has adopted today, and he may have done so consistently over a number of months, but there are many others here in very senior positions who adopt a different position on a daily basis.

**James Heappey** (Wells) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Tom Brake:** No. I will continue because I know that others who have been waiting a very long time also want to speak in the debate.

How many of the 52% will be happy if, for instance, the Government secure a deal that requires the UK to pay a substantial amount to the EU budget—not just the relatively small sums that might be required to stay in, for instance, Erasmus or Horizon 2020, but the larger amounts that might be required to secure privileged access to the single market? That is why the Government are going to need public support on this issue, and that is why the Liberal Democrats have tabled an amendment that would allow people to have a say on the final deal.

As I stated, there is no indication of what the plan will actually include, yet we as Members of Parliament are expected to bind ourselves to triggering article 50, no matter what, at an arbitrary date. The High Court has made it clear that Parliament must have a proper role in this process, and that does not mean signing away any right to scrutiny in exchange for the shallowest
of promises from a Government that cannot hack any questioning of their motives, strategy or direction. We will not allow ourselves to be bullied into this, and all Opposition parties—and some Members, I hope, on the Government Benches—should resist that. The Liberal Democrats will vote against the Government amendment and the motion, if amended. We cannot support a parliamentary stitch-up that would deny the people a vote on the final deal and straitjacket Members of Parliament in an arbitrary timetable.

I call on the Labour party to remember that it is the official Opposition; it should not cave in to Conservative attempts to deny the public a final say on the most important question facing the country in a generation—it should not be muzzled. It is now clear that the Liberal Democrats are the real Opposition to the Conservative Brexit Government. We are striving to keep Britain open, tolerant and united.

5.11 pm

**Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): I am grateful to follow the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake). I rise to give the Government my complete support.

**Kwasi Kwarteng** (Spelthorne) (Con): First time.

**Mr Baker:** No, it is not the first time—I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

I want to pick up on what the Secretary of State said—that there are none so deaf as those who will not hear. I will go on to talk about what else might be said, but, first, what has the Prime Minister said? In particular, she has said:

“Our laws made not in Brussels but in Westminster.

Our judges sitting not in Luxembourg but in courts across the land.

The authority of EU law in this country ended forever.”

Of the deal, she has said:

“I want it to include cooperation on law enforcement and counter-terrorism work.

I want it to involve free trade, in goods and services.

I want it to give British companies the maximum freedom to trade with and operate within the Single Market—and let European businesses do the same here.

But let’s state one thing loud and clear: we are not leaving the European Union only to give up control of immigration all over again. And we are not leaving only to return to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. That’s not going to happen.”

So the Prime Minister has said a great deal, and it has been supplemented elsewhere.

One thing I particularly welcome is my right hon. Friend’s work to secure reciprocal rights for those EU citizens currently resident in the UK and for those British citizens currently resident in the EU. What we have learned through the press is that 20 member states seem to have agreed to her framework arrangements, but that the Chancellor of Germany and EU officials at the most senior levels are obstructing that—indifferently and intransigently—when they could actually put people’s minds at ease by agreeing with our Prime Minister.

**Sir William Cash:** Does my hon. Friend accept that what goes with the Prime Minister’s very clear statements is that jurisdiction returns here? After the negotiations and the repeal, we will bring in our own Bill to deal, for example, with immigration and with a whole range of other matters. It will be this jurisdiction that deals with those things, not the European jurisdiction.

**Mr Baker:** I fully accept that. In fact, together with the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who spoke a few minutes ago, I very much hope that we are able to deliver a much more equal immigration policy, which treats people much more fairly, from wherever they may come.

On the point about reciprocal rights, I particularly pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson). Although he has not long been in the House, he has been absolutely indefatigable on this issue, and I look forward to seeing what else he has to say.

On the EEA and the customs union, I refer to the argument of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley), who made the case brilliantly. We cannot stay in the customs union if we want tariff-free trade with other parts of the world. We cannot stay in the EEA if we want 80% of our economy to be subject to new free trade arrangements with the rest of the world, because one has to put one’s domestic regulation on the table. Therefore, the implication of what the Prime Minister has said—that we are going to be a beacon of free trade—is that we must leave both.

**John Redwood:** Does my hon. Friend agree that there is absolutely no need to pay these countries anything, because they need to trade with us and I am sure they are not going to pay us?

**Mr Baker:** I do agree. It would be quite wrong for us to pay a market access fee. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) said, they sell us more than we buy from them, so perhaps they should be paying us a fee. Of course, the facetious nature of his remark, if I may say so, indicates the fallacy at work. It is one thing for us to cover the costs of programmes in which we participate but quite another simply to pay for the privilege of selling.

I offer some other things that the Government might consider saying, and that would not harm our position, when they set out their framework agreement. We could state our intentions on third-country passporting for deemed equivalence and mutual recognition, particularly in relation to the financial services industry. I recommend the Legatum Institute Special Trade Commission’s report on that subject. We could say that our withdrawal agreement will cover trade and non-trade aspects of our relationship, including, in particular, those covered in the magisterial 1,000-page document from Business for Britain. No one can say that there was not plenty of high-quality research available before the vote. We could say that we will have mutual recognition of products, standards, licences and qualifications. We could explain trade facilitation. We could talk about territorial waters and our intentions there. We could talk about our intentions for the aggregate measure of support in agriculture.

The Government could explain how the great repeal Bill will work, how transposition of EU law into UK law will work, what will happen when something needs to be amended or repealed and what exceptions there
will be. I believe we can do much better on competition law—in particular, in driving out anti-competitive market distortions—than the EU currently does. We could explain our process for trade deal ratification. We need to say more about how WTO rectification will work. There has already been a written ministerial statement, but more can be said.

We need to explain to our trading partners all around the world our willingness to liberalise, to be more free-trading and to ensure that we are able to lift out of poverty people in some of the poorest agricultural regions of the world who are currently excluded from trading in a proper manner.

Mr Duncan Smith: Speak for decency.

Mr Baker: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. We need to help those people to build their way out of poverty through trade.

I would like to give the Government an example of a form of words that could be used to reassure industry. If I make mistakes on this, they are my own, but this is derived from some advice from a trade negotiation lawyer. We could say: “The terms of our withdrawal agreement will ensure no UK-owned or UK-based manufacturer will be disadvantaged by our exit. Both EU and UK manufacturers seek tariff and barrier-free access to each other’s markets, and we will seek to deliver it with a broad, deep and permanent free trade agreement. We intend that manufacturers in the UK will either pay no tariffs or that they will have the opportunity to take advantage of a fully WTO-compliant tariff drawback system. UK manufacturing, after we leave the EU, will be more successful, more competitive, and lower-cost.” If the Government made that statement, everyone would begin to understand that our future will be far brighter once we have left the European Union, taken back control and made our own way.

I leave the House with this thought: the Legatum Institute Special Trade Commission proposes that, if we implement the very best in contemporary trade practice, we can add an extra 50% to gross world product in the next 15 years. That means unemployment at 2% in the UK, no deficit and billions of people lifted out of poverty.

5.19 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of my constituents, the people of Bristol West. Four out of five of them voted to remain, but they are all democrats. We have been dealt nothing but uncertainty by the Government, and that uncertainty cannot go on, because it is not good enough. It is already affecting businesses and individuals in Bristol West, and I will fight for them.

The big employers in my constituency—the university, the aerospace industry, the financial services sector and the healthcare system—all depend on the current free movement of labour and harmonisation of regulations across the EU. That may not sound sexy, but it is really important. The cost of imports and raw materials has gone up as the pound has sunk. The university and the tech and creative sectors have told me that they are being cut out of collaborative research and development proposals funded by Horizon 2020 and other streams.

We do not know whether the Government will protect EU workers’ rights and environmental protection and bring them into UK legislation.

I passionately support the current free—or, rather, reciprocal—movement of people around the European Union. That provision has helped our industries, and I want it to be part of where we end up. I welcome and value all the EU citizens working in Bristol, and I know well the benefits for the UK when people from the UK are able to live, work, study and retire in other EU countries. There is complete uncertainty for all those people. They are not bargaining chips; they are people.

Young people, as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) has said, feel betrayed by this decision. They have told me that they feel as though we have thrown away their futures. I have also heard from industry that the harmonisation of regulations between the UK and the EU for our key industries must be part of what we end up with for them to trade freely; that is something other Members have spoken about. I want the UK to retain its right to apply for funds from Horizon 2020, to help us to remain in our position as a place that has among the best university provision in the world.

Many of us, from all parts of the House, feel we are economically better off being a full part of the single European market than being out of it. Anyone in the world can trade with the single European market. I want us, and businesses in my constituency want us, to do that as full members without tariffs and barriers. That is a choice that the Government could take.

John Redwood: Did the hon. Lady learn anything from the referendum majority view? Does she not understand that a lot of people think that we are inviting too many people in, which makes it difficult to have good public services and decent wages?

Thangam Debbonaire: I have heard the result of the referendum, but I also know that there are 33,000 people from EU countries working in our NHS at the moment and that they face complete uncertainty, as does the NHS.

Labour has forced the Government to climb down today. Without the leadership shown by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the Government would have continued to refuse to give this House any information about their overall aims for the UK’s relationship with the EU. Now they have had to commit to providing that information before they trigger article 50, and I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that. The Supreme Court may yet rule that the Government also have to give Parliament the right to vote on the matter, and I hope that it does so. The Government could end that uncertainty today and cut the expense of this court case by deciding to commit to giving this House full scrutiny and a vote.

My inbox is rammed with emails from constituents asking me to resist article 50, and I believe that that is, in large part, because of the absence of a good plan for Brexit. My constituents are not unreasonable. They know that 52% of those who voted in June voted to leave, but they want the views of the 48% to be represented in this process. I will do that unstintingly, because to do otherwise would be to allow a tyranny of the majority, which I do not believe is worthy of this House. My constituents deserve to know what the plan is; whether
it will help or hinder our jobs, our industries, our environment and our standing in the world; and, above all, what will happen to our reciprocal movement of people, about which people are left with great uncertainty.

When I went out of my front door this morning, I may not have been certain exactly which bus I would get, but I knew the route it needed to take me on. I knew which bus stop to start at. I did not just get on any old bus without looking at the number and checking that it was going where I intended to go. I cannot ask my constituents in Bristol West to get on an unnumbered bus, and I do not think that hon. Members representing people who voted with the majority to leave want their constituents to get on an unnumbered bus either.

Whether people voted leave or remain in June, they did not vote to lose their jobs; they did not vote to lose trans-border co-operation over terrorism; and they did not vote to dirty our beaches and rivers by removing our protection from pollution and our protection for the air. For the sake of everyone, whether leave voters or remainers, we need to see the plan—not the full negotiating strategy, but the plan.

Mike Gapes: I agree entirely with what my hon. Friend is saying, but is there not also a problem in that, in their amendment, the Government are proposing we start the process of leaving the European Union on or by 31 March? We know that there will be elections in Germany, the Netherlands and France and that real negotiations cannot start then, so the period will be limited.

Thangam Debbonaire: I understand the point my hon. Friend makes, but I believe my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras has secured a good deal for us. It is not certain, and some of my constituents will want to know why I am voting the way I am voting tonight, but I will vote with the Labour shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union because I support what he has done to get this Government to make their plan clear. If, to get that, I have to agree to vote for what seems like a very sulky Government amendment, then so be it. It is worth making such a compromise because my constituents in Bristol West deserve to know and want to know what the plan is. Local campaigning organisations in Bristol—they have campaigned strongly for and supported Europe—have created and adopted a petition with some key demands and are circulating it, and I support them in doing so.

I ask the Government to get on with answering these questions for the sake of the people of Bristol West and of the whole UK. This Government are trying to avoid scrutiny, but Labour are holding them to account. I will continue to stand up for the industries, the jobs and, above all, the people of Bristol West. The Opposition will hold the Government to the agreement to bring their plan to this House for scrutiny and a vote, and if that plan is non-existent or inadequate, I will vote against article 50. I owe that to my constituents and to the country.

5.26 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), who is a near constituency neighbour of mine, although I cannot say I am in agreement either with her or with most of her constituents.

This is a very interesting debate. As one listened to the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), one discovered that Labour Members really had nothing to debate at all. They have accepted that there would be no disclosure of material that was in any way damaging to the negotiations. Just to add a cherry to the top of the cake that we are all looking forward to eating in due course, they have accepted a date for the implementation of article 50. Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition have reached the point of such loyalty that they are having an Opposition day debate to back the policy of Her Majesty’s Government.

I think this is a very interesting way of spending our time, and perhaps having the Opposition supporting Government policy will be a new means of forming consensus across Parliament, but one does wonder why they decided to have a day’s debate on this—purely to support the Government—rather than on the other things they could have debated. The answer one comes to is that, when the Government tabled their amendment last night, they cooked the Opposition’s goose. This debate is not really about the form of words used—or even the split infinitive—in Her Majesty’s Opposition’s motion, but about seeking to reject the decision that was made by the British people on 23 June.

That is what underlies every bit of this process. One minute, it is about delay, with hon. Gentlemen and hon. Ladies on the Labour Benches—even some on the Government side—saying, “We are doing it too fast. We should slow down and be a bit more cautious, because it would be so dangerous to do what the British people asked us to do at the pace at which they expected us to do it. Surely that is not wise.” Such people have delayed Brexit through applications to the Court.

Labour Members have also come to Parliament. Oh, how wonderful—what joy that, suddenly, so many of them are in favour of parliamentary scrutiny. When I sat in the Chamber discussing issues sent for debate by the European Scrutiny Committee, were the Benches heaving? Time after time, Labour Members were represented only by their Front-Bench spokesman. In debates in Committee put forward by the European Scrutiny Committee, in which every Member has an entitlement to turn up and be heard, do debates run for the full two and a half hours that they are allotted, or do people try to get through them in about 10 minutes and then go back to signing their Christmas cards? Parliamentary scrutiny has become the watchword of the people who held Parliament in contempt. Why do they bring it up? Because they are condescending to the British people: they think the British people got it wrong.

Thangam Debbonaire: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am honoured to give way to the hon. Lady.

Thangam Debbonaire: The hon. Gentleman and I debated this very issue many times during the referendum campaign—and, I must say, very courteously—but does he not remember what he said so many times, which is
[Thangam Debbonaire]

that Parliament should be sovereign? If Parliament is sovereign, surely we have to scrutinise and vote on the deal.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Parliament is indeed sovereign, and Parliament, in its wisdom, passed a referendum Bill; and my right hon. Friend the Lord President of the Council said that it was advisory. Just think about that. Who was it supposed to advise? Did Parliament pass a Bill to advise itself? Surely not. If it had been to advise Parliament, Parliament would have made the Bill automatically effective, because we do not need to advise ourselves on the Bills that we should pass. It was clearly an exercise of parliamentary sovereignty to advise the Crown in the exercise of the prerogative. Parliamentary sovereignty has already been expressed and ought to be fulfilled.

Those who are appealing now to parliamentary scrutiny are in fact rejecting an Act passed through this House, and worse, they are rejecting our employers—our bosses, our liege lords—the British people, who decided this matter for us. They use a glorious language, of which Lewis Carroll would have been proud—a Humpty-Dumpty-esque approach to saying what they really mean. Even in this motion—when it was first brought forward, before the Government had managed to corral it into, in effect, a Government motion—they say how much they respect the decision. Respect! The word has been changed by the lexicographers. It used to mean that one held something in high esteem and high regard and believed it should be implemented; now it means “condescend to, think ridiculous, think unwise”. The word “respect” has been utterly devalued by those on the Opposition Benches, as they feel the British people got it wrong. Let us not use the word “respect” of the electorate any more; let us say, “Obey,” for we will obey the British electorate.

And yes indeed, we have a plan. There is a plan set out clearly, and that is that we will leave. Everything else flows from that—everything else is leather or prunella. Leaving means, as the Prime Minister said, that there is no more supremacy of EU law; the European Court of Justice may advise and witter on but no more will it outrank this House, and any contribution we make to the European Union will be from our overseas aid budget, because it will be supporting poor countries.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Of course I will give way.

Adam Afriyie: Pray may my hon. Friend continue.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am extremely grateful for the extra minute.

Leaving is everything. That is the point. The rest of it is subsidiary. It is the ordinary activity of government, which the Government do as long as they command a majority in this House. The ultimate parliamentary scrutiny, which all Governments have suffered from going back at least to the 19th century and probably before, is the ability to command a majority in this House. If a Government can do that, it is then quite right that they are able to exercise the royal prerogative in the details of negotiation. As my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) so rightly put it, if we were to tie down every jot and tittle of what the Government were negotiating, we would spend our whole time in the law courts. That makes government impossible.

It is not a man, a plan, a canal: Panama—a wonderful palindrome. It is a lady, a plan, freedom: Brexit.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Such has been the excess of interventions and excited speeches this afternoon that I am afraid I have to reduce the time limit to four minutes.

5.33 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), particularly as I will say something about legislative consent motions, about which we have tussled previously. I draw his attention to something he said towards the end of his speech. If he would care to look at page 154 of the transcript of the Supreme Court proceedings yesterday afternoon, he will see that the Supreme Court referred to the fact that at the time that the Bill to permit the referendum was going through this House, no less than the Government spokesperson, the then Minister for Europe, now Leader of the House, said:

“...the legislation is about holding a vote; it makes no provision for what follows. The referendum is advisory”.—[Official Report, 16 June 2015; Vol. 597, c. 231.]

Now is the time for this House to make provision about what follows on from the vote.

What I really want to speak about, in the brief time I have, is the concern on the Scottish National party Benches that the motion makes no call for the devolved nations to have a formal role, or for their agreement to be sought before triggering article 50. The right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) made much of his desire to protect the concerns of the 48% across the UK who voted to remain part of the EU. My concern, and the concern of my colleagues, is to protect the interests of the 62% of Scots who voted to remain part of the EU. I am sure some of my hon. Friends sitting on the Benches behind me will be concerned to protect the interests of the 56% of Northern Irish voters who voted to remain in the EU.

Triggering article 50 will lead to the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament being curtailed and the rights of individuals and businesses being affected. That is why the Lord Advocate has been on his feet this afternoon, across the road in the Supreme Court, arguing that the consent of the Scottish Parliament should be sought. Like the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), I do not want to talk about the legalities; but I want to talk about the political implications of the line the Government have adopted in the Supreme Court.

The Exiting the European Union Committee was told, by a witness at our very first session, that failure to obtain the consent of the Scottish Parliament to the negotiations around article 50 would trigger a constitutional crisis.
John Redwood: Does the hon. and learned Lady not understand that when we get the powers back from the European Union more power can go to the Scottish Parliament?

Joanna Cherry: The right hon. Gentleman is getting rather ahead of himself, but we on the SNP Benches will make a careful note of that, because the person who officially speaks for Scotland—the one Tory MP in Scotland—seems rather unclear about what powers will be returned to Scotland. But we take on board what the Secretary of State said that no law would be changed for which this Parliament has a role in this process, regardless of what the Supreme Court says, from a political point of view seek our consent to this process.

5.40 pm

Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to debate this important—and, indeed, defining—issue for our country. This is the 14th time Ministers, including the Prime Minister, have come to the House to debate or answer questions on Brexit, and there have also been four Westminster Hall debates. The Exiting the European Union Committee is up and running; indeed we took evidence this morning from the CBI and the TUC. That is the vital role for Parliament in this Brexit process. Let no one say that Parliament is not already discharging its responsibilities, and let no one confuse that essential scrutiny role with the designs of—let us face it—a small and dwindling minority who genuinely seek to delay or derail Brexit.

I view Brexit as a three-stage process. First came the incredibly important but short-term job of stabilising the economy in the immediate aftermath of the vote. If we take a moment to look at that, we will see that the Government have done a very good job. I also pay tribute to the previous Government for the resilience of the economy in the immediate aftermath of the vote. If we take a moment to look at that, we will see that the Government have done a very good job. I also pay tribute to the previous Government for the resilience of the economy since 23 June.

The second stage is to prepare for the Brexit negotiations. No one can underestimate the huge amount of work going on behind the scenes, for which I pay tribute to Ministers and their wider teams. The contours of our negotiation are plain for anyone to see, except those deliberately closing their eyes. We must give effect to the will of the British people. At the time of the referendum, every party leader seemed, at least in theory, to accept that premise, but now Labour and particularly the Liberal Democrats are cynically changing their position. I am still not clear exactly where the Labour Front-Bench team stand.

The vote to leave the EU was a vote to take back national democratic control of our laws, our money and our borders, as we were reminded almost daily during the referendum campaign, but I do not want to dwell on that. The Prime Minister told the House on 24 October that she would set out the high-level principles before and after the Christmas recess—and that is wise, but it would clearly be utterly foolish to show our negotiating hand to our European partners in any more detail before then.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the Prime Minister could at last make it clear that our membership of the customs union and the internal
market are incompatible with the other objectives the Government have set out? At least then we could have clarity on those two issues.

Mr Raab: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. It is my view that, given the positions already announced, we will almost inevitably be coming out of the customs union and the single market. Incidentally, that is also the evidence given to the Brexit Committee by everyone we have heard from so far. I understand why the Government do not want to drip feed their negotiating strategy into the public domain but want to let us know when they are ready with the whole strategy, and we now have a clear timetable for that.

I want to get beyond the procedures, the tricksy games trying to trip up the Government, the name calling on both sides and the divisiveness of the referendum campaign. Instead, I want to spell out the positive, ambitious, optimistic vision that we on all sides ought to share for our post-Brexit relationship with our European friends. On trade, we want as few barriers as possible, in our rational, mutual economic self-interest. On security co-operation, there is a host of things that we can do together without being subject to the European Court’s jurisdiction. On policing, there is Europol, as well as the PNR—passenger name record—system and other forms of data sharing. All those things are already done with non-EU members.

We can continue with and strengthen our commitment to our European friends, particularly in the aftermath of the Brussels and Paris terrorist attacks. On defence co-operation, I praise the Prime Minister’s incredibly important commitment to our Polish allies during the Polish Prime Minister’s visit here last month. Poland and Europe should know that we stand shoulder to shoulder with our European allies in the face of the menace posed by President Putin, regardless of the position of the President-elect across the pond.

On immigration, between the positions of open-door immigration and pulling up the drawbridge, it seems to me that there is huge scope for central arrangements on visa waivers for tourism and business trips, and for skills migration to be subject to permits. Such systems would still allow us to maintain national democratic control in the way that the British people expect. I hope we can move beyond procedures and the divisiveness of the referendum campaign and work together across the House. That is what the British public, by three to one, expect us to do.—no more political games, but getting on with delivering Brexit. I commend and support the amendment.

The consensus is entirely artificial, however, and is made up of a purely ephemeral coincidence of tactics without any substantive or strategic work, we should not fall for it. I am here to represent my constituents, who voted by more than 78% to remain, and I know that they would not fall for this amended motion.

John Redwood: Is it not a good idea to try to get a consensus to back the British people in their decision?

Mark Durkan: I am not one of the British people; I am here as an Irish person, proudly carrying an Irish passport. However, I fully respect the terms on which other hon. Members come to this House. I come to the debate in circumstances in which the people of Northern Ireland voted by 56% to remain, while the people of my constituency voted by 78% to remain, as I said. The people of Northern Ireland, moreover, previously voted for the Good Friday agreement in a unique dual referendum process involving the north and south of Ireland—that was the high watermark of Irish constitutional democracy. I am pledged to adhere to that and I make no apology to anybody for it. I do not seek to indict the terms on which anyone else comes to this House to speak in this or any other debate.

The principle of consent is meant to be the core of the Good Friday agreement. It is not only housed in that agreement, but it was the principle of consent that was used to endorse the agreement. A week after the 23 June referendum, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers), tabled a written statement on the security situation in Northern Ireland. The words she used about republican dissidents on 30 June were interesting.

Kwasi Kwarteng: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mark Durkan: She said—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. A point of order has been raised by Mr Kwarteng.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I have just realised, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my intended point of order has been attended to by the Clerks. It involved the clock.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you. The clock was stuck, and it is now working again.

Mark Durkan: The then Secretary of State said:

“Their activities are against the democratically expressed wishes of the people in Northern Ireland. They continue to seek relevance and inflict harm on a society that overwhelmingly rejects them”—she could have been talking about the Northern Ireland Conservatives. She continued:

“Their support is very limited. Northern Ireland’s future will only be determined by democracy and consent.”—[Official Report, 30 June 2016; Vol. 612, c. 13W(S).]

Where is the democracy and consent for the people of Northern Ireland when it comes to Brexit? Many of us are free to come here and vote against article 50 as and when the relevant provisions are tabled. When we do so, that will be consistent with our principled support for the Good Friday agreement and consistent with our pledges to our constituents honourably to represent them.
Michael Gove: As a result of the Good Friday agreement and the consent principle, the people of Northern Ireland voted to remain in the United Kingdom and to give foreign policy and treaty-making powers to the UK Government. There is no inconsistency between a UK Government choosing to trigger article 50 and the hon. Gentleman’s constituents having objections to that. There is no breach of a consensus.

Mark Durkan: I am afraid the right hon. Gentleman does not know the difference—people in Northern Ireland are very clear about this—between the principle of consent and actually giving consent. He has made a mistake that is consistently made, and it is a mistake that will strain some people’s belief in the Good Friday agreement.

People such as the right hon. Gentleman do not recognise the damage that they are doing. Carefully compacted layers of understanding created the bedrock of the Good Friday agreement, and fissures are being driven into those key foundations. Remember that, as a result of that agreement, the principle of consent is housed in the Irish constitution as well, because the referendum—north and south—changed the constitution. It removed the territorial claim, and two additional clauses were inserted.

If the key constitutional precept of the Good Friday agreement is not housed in any new UK-EU treaty that might result from these negotiations, we shall be in a very serious situation. The promise and the understanding that the people of Ireland, north and south, were given when they endorsed the Good Friday agreement in overwhelming numbers will have been betrayed and damaged. I do not accept, and no Irish nationalist, north or south, who supported the Good Friday agreement has ever said, that the principle of consent that is housed in the Irish constitution can be removed, replaced or surpassed by a vote in England on Brexit or on anything else.

The Good Friday agreement states very clearly that the question of Irish unity will be a matter for the people of Ireland, north and south, without external impediment. That key principle must be reflected in any new UK-EU treaty that making clear that if in the future Northern Ireland votes to become part of a united Ireland, it will do so as an automatic part of the EU, without any change in Ireland’s terms of membership and without the need for any new negotiations on the part of Northern Ireland. We cannot afford, in the Northern Ireland context, the sort of trickery that was used in the Scottish context to raise question marks over whether EU membership would apply. This is a key principle and tenet for those of us in the House who support the Good Friday agreement.

There are other risks to the agreement as well. There are risks to the weight of the rights in strand 2. There is also significant damage afoot in relation to strand 2, which involved a delicate balance of institutional and constitutional arrangements. That strand will be left in complete deficit after Brexit unless someone takes care of it.

5.52 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan). As a Unionist, I share his concern about the need to ensure that whatever arrangements we make will protect and safeguard the Good Friday agreement, the position of Northern Ireland and our relationships with the Republic. As Chairman of the Justice Committee, I also think it is important for us to take account of the position of the Crown dependencies, including the Isle of Man, which has a particular economic relationship with both Northern Ireland and the Republic.

It is no secret that I campaigned and voted to stay in the European Union, and I still believe that that would have been the better outcome. I regret the decision that the majority of the British people took. However, as a democrat, one must live with decisions that one may think were ill-advised. The majority decided otherwise, and we must respect their decision. For that reason, I have no problem with voting for the Government amendment, but neither would I have a problem with the Labour party’s original motion. Let me explain why.

It is perfectly reasonable and sensible to have a plan. Having made a decision, we now need to remove ourselves from the European Union in an orderly fashion, and that requires a high-level set of objectives. It certainly does not mean giving away every bit of the detail of our negotiating tactics on the day. I have complete faith in the ability of the Secretary of State and his team—to handle those matters pragmatically, and pragmatism is, I think, the most important consideration. At the end of the day, the British people voted to leave the European Union, but they did not vote to do so on terms that would make them materially worse off. It is therefore critical that, whatever we achieve, we achieve it in a way that safeguards the economic interests of this country and its people, which I believe will be possible if we are cool-headed and sensible. That must always be the top priority.

It is also appropriate for us to get on with the job of triggering article 50, for the same reason. Both the plan and the move to invoke article 50 are necessary to deal with uncertainty. It is quite right that some of the worst economic predictions made in the referendum campaign have not come about, which is good news, but that is, of course, in part—not wholly—because of investment decisions taken before the referendum. Let us hope that the things continue that way but, as my old grandmother said, “Don’t always count your chickens until they’re hatched.”

What is crucial, however, is that we continue to have a stable climate for investment. In some areas that has been achieved, but in other sectors, particularly financial services and the property sector, there are clear instances of investment decisions being put on hold. The sooner we have clarity about the timeframe we are working to—hence we have the Government amendment—and a plan that we are working to, the better, as it will then be much easier to reassure business about those key points. I think that that is a perfectly sensible means of reconciling the original motion and the amendment.

The key things with which the plan needs to deal are financial services, legal certainty and, above all, our ability, if necessary, to have a sensible period of transition. The Prime Minister has hinted that we should not face a cliff edge. Our financial and legal services are critical to this country’s economic wellbeing, and because of the complexity of the regulations we have to deal with and re-transpose into our own law, a transitional
period might well be needed. Ministers should not be afraid of that; if it is a necessary part of our achieving a practical outcome for this country, we should be happy to have it. We should also have confidence in proper scrutiny by this House of what is in the interests of our nation as a whole. As democrats, we can be optimistic about the future, but only if we are pragmatic and do not allow sloganeering to get in the way of common sense in our negotiations.

5.56 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill).

I respect the vote in principle of the people to leave the EU, but they made that vote on three grounds: more money, market access and lower migration. What we are seeing, however, is that instead of getting £350 million to the NHS, it is going to cost us £300 million a week; instead of higher living standards, we have 5% inflation because of depreciation eating away at people's incomes; and borrowing is going up, so everyone will be in debt with another £1,000 to pay back.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Is the hon. Gentleman essentially saying the people got it wrong on 23 June?

Geraint Davies: I am saying that people were misled, so basically now we are going to have another year of austerity.

On market access, everyone is talking about a hard Brexit. It is all very well Nissan, Tata and others being paid billions of pounds under the table to bribe them, and bribes to Tata, Nissan and others to continue to locate in the UK. What is his evidence for that assertion?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman has made the astonishing assertion that there have been under-the-table bribes to Tata, Nissan and others to continue to locate in the UK. What is his evidence for that assertion?

Geraint Davies: Clearly they have come to the Government and said, "The only reason we're in this country is to platform into the EU market, and if we face tariffs we want the money back or we're going to move," and the Government have given them the money. I know the right hon. Gentleman knows nothing about economics and just criticises the Bank of England, but that is the simple business case.

As for the ridiculous arguments the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues put about on trade, what he wants to do is turn his back on 46% of our trade and somehow dream we can make up those relationships, which were always weaker than the EU negotiating new bilaterals. That is fantasy land.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Geraint Davies: I will not.

I do not think that people voted for Brexit—

Michael Gove: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Geraint Davies: No, I will not.

I do not think people voted for Brexit at any cost. In fact 75% of those who voted to leave have said they will not leave with a blank cheque and at any cost. The situation is that even though the majority voted in principle to leave, the mass of people—the silent majority—are now thinking twice. They do not want this decision made behind closed doors; they want to be able to have the final say. The silent majority want the final say on the final deal because they will live with the consequences.

A lot of rubbish has been talked about article 50 on both sides of this Chamber, but the reality is that as soon as we trigger it, that is literally giving back our membership of the EU. We then have no negotiating power, and the other 27 countries will decide in their own interests what deal we have. The Members on both sides of the House who want a referendum after we trigger article 50 must realise that if we have a referendum or a vote here and say we do not like the deal, the EU 27 nations will say, "Tough; that's the one that suits us. It stops others leaving. Live with it and shut up." That is a constitutional fact, and it is the primary reason why I cannot support the amendment that calls on the Government to invoke article 50 by 31 March. After that date, we will have no negotiating power. What is more, there is an election in France in May and an election in Germany in October, so that time would be wasted even if negotiations were going on because the two biggest power players would not be able to engage with us as they will be focusing on their domestic audiences. Article 50 should therefore certainly not be triggered until November next year at the earliest.

Sammy Wilson: Is the logic of the hon. Gentleman's argument that we might as well never trigger article 50 because we will have given away all our negotiating powers, regardless of when it is triggered?

Geraint Davies: I introduced a Bill on the terms of our withdrawal from the EU. It stated that after the emergence of the situation in which we now find ourselves had become apparent, the British people should have the final say on the deal before article 50 was triggered. The EU would then have an incentive to negotiate with us, because it would know that our default position was to stay in the EU. At the moment, it has no such incentive.

The reason the Government are keeping their cards close to their chest is that there is nothing on those cards, because none of the 27 EU countries will speak to the Government. They are just saying, "You're leaving—get out! Trigger article 50, get on with it, and we'll tell you what you're getting." People are buying that up and thinking that it is in the British interest, which it clearly is not. I appreciate that the Government's game is to rush forward with article 50 before March, to take two weeks to repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, to rush towards a May election and then to have the appalling Budget that they will have delayed from March in the autumn. They would then say, "Oh, what could we do? We didn't realise there was going to be a downturn." Then all the money going to Nissan and Tata and the others under the table would be revealed. But the British people will not buy that—
Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) has now twice implied that the Government are making, or that private companies operating in this country are taking, under-the-table cash payments in contravention of all the corporate regulations and anti-corruption legislation. Could you invite him to reconsider and perhaps recast his argument?

Geraint Davies: There was certainly no wrongdoing. What I was suggesting is that huge amounts of public money are being pushed towards foreign companies to get them to stay here and that the Government have pointedly refused to tell the Office for Budget Responsibility, when asked, how much money was involved so that the OBR could factor it into its forecasts. The Government have refused to give those figures. These are enormous amounts of money; we are talking about hundreds of millions of pounds, which would affect our economic forecasts. The Government refuse to give the figures now, but they will come out after everything has been decided and article 50 has been triggered in March, when there is no room for reversal. The British public deserve and want either a good deal or no deal, and the right to decide that question. This should not be decided behind closed doors. We need to delay article 50 until November to allow the people to decide their own future.

6.3 pm

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): In a debate with much intense feeling, I would like to highlight the fact that there are some areas of common ground. First, there is acceptance across the House that there needs to be, and will be, parliamentary scrutiny. Secondly, and importantly, it has been accepted on both sides of the House that parliamentary scrutiny should not trump achieving the best deal for our country. In this debate and in the many that will follow, we must never forget that second point. Our overriding concern must be to get the right long-term arrangement for our country's future.

I will outline the steps to which the Government have already agreed. This House has already resolved that there will be parliamentary scrutiny. In a motion agreed to by both sides of the House on 12 October, this House resolved that there would be

"a full and transparent debate on the Government's plan”

and that the House should properly

"scrutinise that plan for leaving the EU before Article 50 is invoked".

The Secretary of State confirmed in that debate a commitment that

in circumstances where there is a mandatory obligation to inform the European Parliament. Through her amendment, the Prime Minister has now agreed to publish a plan, and the Secretary of State said today that it is inconceivable that there will not be a vote on the final deal. It therefore follows that there is already an agreed level of parliamentary scrutiny, but we must strike the right balance between parliamentary scrutiny and ensuring that we maintain the best negotiating stance.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I was a remainer, too, and I welcome the fact that a statement of the broad parameters of the British negotiating position will be made clear, but does my hon. and learned Friend agree that we should never allow any demands for excessive granularity to undermine the UK's negotiating position or the national interest?

Lucy Frazer: I absolutely agree. It is vital that we get the best deal—not that we have the power to determine the deal at every stage.

The Opposition have accepted at many stages that we must not tie the Government's hands. In the October motion, it was accepted across the House that the process must

"not undermine the negotiating position of the Government as negotiations are entered into”.

The shadow Secretary of State stated in the course of that debate that

"navigating our exit from the EU will not be an easy process, and it will require shrewd negotiating”

and that we

"must put the national interest first”.—[Official Report, 12 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 332.]

He accepted that there had to be a degree of confidentiality and flexibility. He repeated those very words today. Those statements, which the Opposition have repeatedly made, must be honoured and remembered, because we made some strategic errors when we first negotiated in Europe.

To the Spaak Committee meetings of 1955 that eventuated in the treaty of Rome, we sent a sole British delegate, a minor trade official called Russell Bretherton. He was eventually summoned home on the grounds that Britain should have no part in what a more senior civil servant described as this

"mysticism which appeals to European… federalists”.

Interviewed in later life about the experience, Bretherton said:

“If we had been able to say that we agreed in principle, we could have got whatever kind of common market we wanted. I have no doubt of that at all.”

Now, we have an opportunity to renegotiate our role in Europe and the rest of the world. I do not want to say to my children that we did not get the best deal because of our fear, our scepticism, our adversarial parliamentary system, political point scoring and, possibly, ulterior political motives. I do not want to say that we restricted ourselves in negotiating the right arrangement for our long-term future.
6.8 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I welcome the motion tabled by the official Opposition and I had been planning to vote to support it. However, their adoption of the Government amendment changes things in two key ways. I regret that the Labour leadership appears to be walking into the Tories’ trap; they are insisting that, in return for accepting Labour’s motion, it votes to invoke article 50 by March. Introducing such a tight timetable, based on an arbitrary deadline, undermines the principle that this is about getting the best possible deal for Britain. That is particularly pertinent given that serious negotiations will inevitably not start until autumn next year—after French and German elections. We will therefore effectively lose about six months if we stick to the timetable set out in the amendment.

To say the Labour strategy of pushing the Government to produce a plan worthy of the name by the end of January—in effect only four to six weeks away—is ambitious would be to take understatement to new levels. Any plan needs to be more than a summary of levels. Any plan needs to be more than a summary of any kind of plan it is. To do so the EU within two years without knowing what might be in the plan and what kind of plan it is. To do so without any solid proposals for an interim deal after two years of negotiation would be particularly reckless.

Turning to the content of the negotiating position, I wish specifically to argue for an outcome that maintains strong social and environmental regulation, and free movement and membership of the single market, because I believe that that is what is best for Britain and for my constituency in Brighton, where so many businesses and the two universities have been talking to me about the uncertainty they believe is being engendered by the current proposals. On the environment, the referendum was not a mandate to weaken our standards on air, water or wildlife. A poll in August found that 83% of the public think that laws protecting wildlife should remain as strong as they are now or be made tougher following our departure from the EU. The environment must not, in any way, be the price we pay for any deal struck with the EU over membership of the single market. In the Environmental Audit Committee last month, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs suggested that about a third of EU environment legislation will not be carried over. That is wholly unacceptable and indicates that the Government are not prepared to fight for the UK to remain part of EU-wide action on tackling climate change, on reducing the use of dangerous chemicals or on animal welfare standards. Any plan must set out how the Prime Minister intends to reflect the cross-border nature of the environmental challenges.

Geraint Davies: Is the hon. Lady concerned, as I am, that 40,000 people a year are dying of diesel pollution in Britain and we may get rid of the EU monitoring standards?

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just point out to the hon. Gentleman that he has just spoken and he is going to prevent other people from speaking, which is discourteous?

Caroline Lucas: Thank you, Mr Speaker. In broad terms, I agree with the point the hon. Gentleman is making about air pollution, because the EU is providing the best bulwark against the reduction of air pollution standards in this country.

Let me move on to talk about freedom of movement, as, sadly, few MPs seem prepared to defend it any longer. It is especially sad and worrying that the leadership of the official Opposition are in danger of ceding the terms of this debate to the right. I readily accept that it is easy to blame free movement when the benefits have been enjoyed so unevenly. There are people in my city of Brighton and Hove who have not visited Brighton seashore because they cannot afford to get there. For them, the idea of being able to live, work or study in another country is about as likely as travelling to the moon, but that reality does not justify denying them the right to free movement in the future. On the contrary, it should mean fighting tooth and nail for a Europe of equals, in which the hard-won rights enshrined in EU law do not just exist in the statute books as perks for the privileged, but are genuinely available to all EU citizens. We should have, and we deserve to have, successful policies to redistribute wealth fairly and to create real opportunities for all.

There is an enormous task ahead of us to reunite our country, and it will be made all the more difficult by further economic hardship of the kind that we will have with a hard Brexit which does not have us as part of the single market and does not have free movement. So we absolutely need to know what the plan is going to look like. The justifiable anger and mistrust felt by those who voted leave will only deepen if the many promises made turn out not even to be worth the red bus they were written on. We need to be honest about how people are feeling and why they feel the way they do. We do not need blindly to follow the damaging, blame-laden rhetoric that is being used to distract from the failure of neo-liberal economics to provide the basic needs of all members of our society. Immigration has been systematically and
cynically scapegoated for everything, when in fact what is at the heart of this is decades of not investing in our public services. That is what—

Mr Speaker: Order. Matt Warman is the next speaker. We have eight would-be contributors and I would like to accommodate them all, so the time limit will have to be reduced, with immediate effect, to three minutes. Colleagues are absolutely welcome to intervene on each other, but if they do, somebody will not get in.

6.14 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Over the past few days, Mr Speaker, I have not seen as much of you as I might have liked, partly because I have had the privilege of being up in my own constituency and partly because I have been in the neighbouring seat of Sleaford and North Hykeham. Until that seat is represented by asking them to put all their cards on the table by the end of March. They say firmly that the Prime Minister is the right person to do it, but the Lincolnshire public doubt that politicians in the House are on their side.

I hope that, through this debate, the message goes back loud and clear, both to Boston and Skegness and to Sleaford and North Hykeham, that Parliament will not seek to set the Government up to deliver anything other than the best possible deal for the UK by asking them to put all their cards on the table and that we will trigger article 50 by the end of March.

We on the Conservative Benches know that that is the right thing to do, and Members on other Benches or those in the Supreme Court seeking to make a different case should accept that to take another view is to go further than questioning Brexit: it is playing with the fundamental principle of democracy that the people must decide.

Some remainers say that that is not what they seek to do, but I would say this to them, in line with what the people of Lincolnshire have been saying to me. The argument that was lost in June was not lost in six weeks. It was lost over years and decades. We in the House govern with the consent of the people. To maintain that consent all of us must bear in mind the fact that we laid out a case in June. Now we must make sure, unused as some of us are to doing so, that we do as we are told. Not doing so risks far more than our relationship with Europe.

6.17 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I support the motion and, after some consideration, the Government amendment. I am prepared to support the Government amendment because it refers to the motion agreed on 12 October, which called on the Prime Minister “to ensure that this House is able properly to scrutinise that plan for leaving the EU before Article 50 is invoked”.

I make it clear that, while accepting 31 March 2017 as the deadline for invoking article 50, my support for that action is contingent on being satisfied that the first part of the provision has been satisfactorily implemented. I will reserve my view until that date and until such time as I have had the opportunity to make a judgment. I assume that proper scrutiny and debate imply an attempt to get some sort of consensus and the capacity of the Opposition to make amendments, along with a genuine attempt to arrive at a position that commands the full support of Members on both sides of the House. I stress to the Government that their position when negotiating with the EU will be improved immeasurably if they can secure that degree of unity.

Another reason for supporting the amendment is that we must end uncertainty. It locks the Government into an obligation to put plans before the House by early January that will at least begin to address some of the issues that we are being asked about on the doorstep and that, to date, have not been dealt with by the Government. Genuine questions about our future—key issues that affect local industries, the aspirations of local people, jobs, civil liberties and so on—have been met hitherto by “Brexit means Brexit” and other vacuous phrases that do not address people’s genuine concerns, such as “red, white and blue Brexit” or, if the Chancellor has his way, grey Brexit.

To continue the colour metaphor, I see this as forcing the Government to nail their colours to the mast and to start to bring before the House some genuine proposals in response to the genuine questions that are being asked—questions such as those that local businessmen asked me: “Will we be part of a single market?” They need to know before investing: “Will we be able to recruit labour in order to meet the additional demand incurred by being in the single market?” Still no answer from the Government. We need an answer. Until this is done, I will not give that support.

6.20 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I have two minutes and 58 seconds to say an awful lot.

The vote offered to the British people on 23 June came with no ifs, no buts and no conditions. The then Prime Minister, David Cameron, who gave us that wonderful referendum, for which I am eternally grateful, spent £9 million of taxpayers’ money to tell us that in the literature that came through our doors. There were no ifs, no buts, no conditions. I recall him saying, whichever side wins, even by one single vote, the will of the people will be respected. It could not be simpler.

I believe my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who has retaken his seat, implied that not all the British people understood what they were voting for. That is what I understood from his speech. If I am wrong, I apologise, but if I am right, may I tell him that he is wrong?

Mr Kenneth Clarke: I do not think either side should resort to attacking the voters on the other side. I did say that I thought very few of them were expressing an opinion one way or the other on whether they should remain in the customs union and under what conditions.
They agreed that they were going to leave the EU; what they were going to do instead was not even discussed during the referendum.

Richard Drax: That is where I must disagree with my right hon. and learned Friend. Leaving the EU, as we have heard from many Government Members means leaving everything to do with the EU. It could not be clearer.

I met a lady outside the polling booth on 23 June on Portland who was holding on to her husband, who was not particularly well. She said to me, “Richard, I’m going to vote with you. I’m going to vote to leave.” I asked her, “Why are you voting to leave?” She looked me straight in the eye and said, “Richard, because I want my country back. I want control of our laws, I want control of our borders, I want our rules and regulations made by people in our Parliament and nowhere else. And if you make a mess, we the electorate can kick you out.” She understood. My electorate want my country back. I want control of our laws, I want control of our future, and I want to be in control at last of the future of our great country. When they start to negotiate. I, for one, am glad that we do not like and do not understand is a firm no. That is been triggered, the uncertainty will go. I tell the House of that I have no doubt. Once article 50 has been into this country, and it is time we took back control. Of that I have seen all the legislation that continues to sweep through our land. Sitting on the European Scrutiny Committee under the admirable chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), I have seen all the legislation that continues to sweep through this country, and it is time we took back control. Of that I have no doubt. Once article 50 has been triggered, the uncertainty will go. I tell the House why: in the EU, the one thing those unelected bureaucrats do not like and do not understand is a firm no. That is when they start to negotiate. I, for one, am glad that we will be in control at last of the future of our great country.

We hear right across the House this afternoon uncertainty. Yes, because people are prevaricating against the will of the British people. That is what is causing the uncertainty across our land. Sitting on the European Scrutiny Committee under the admirable chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), I have seen all the legislation that continues to sweep through this country, and it is time we took back control. Of that I have no doubt. Once article 50 has been triggered, the uncertainty will go. I tell the House why: in the EU, the one thing those unelected bureaucrats do not like and do not understand is a firm no. That is when they start to negotiate. I, for one, am glad that we will be in control at last of the future of our great country.

6.24 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on forcing the Government to concede ground in committing to publish a plan for leaving the EU before they invoke article 50. However, he will have seen from the debate that it is not at all clear what that means. Does it mean the Government are just going to publish a document saying, “We will seek the best possible Brexit and aim for the best possible access to the single market”? If it does, I am afraid we are not clear at all what we are going to get and what the plan is.

We have had a lot of discussion about whether there should be a White Paper, but we have had no commitment from the Government that we will get one. Will it answer specific points about the Government’s priorities? Will it set out their position on single market membership, free movement, security co-operation with our allies, workers’ rights, consumer protections or environmental protections? Will it set out all the red lines? Will it set out the Government’s position on the customs union? We are not clear yet what the plan will be. It is for that reason that I will certainly not be voting for the motion as it stands.

It is also clear, despite what my hon. and learned Friend said about the need for those in this House to accept the referendum decision and not seek to frustrate the Government—I understand why he said that—that the Government’s amendment (a) makes a commitment to 31 March. That timetable was set by the Prime Minister behind closed doors, with no input from Parliament at all. That is the second reason why I will not be able to support the motion.

A lack of clarity will not help us to get a good deal; in fact, it will do exactly the opposite, and that is the most important point that I hope, has come across from today’s debate. The absence of any detail about the Government’s plans has created a vacuum, which has been filled by speculation and by hard Brexiteers. However, words have consequences: proposals to force companies to draw up registers of EU workers; threats to crack down on European students; plans to replace European doctors and nurses working in our NHS; refusing to guarantee the rights of EU citizens who reside in the UK; and doing so much to offend our partners in Europe—described as enemies in this House—with whom we have to negotiate.

I represent a constituency that has had two riots in a generation. I represent a constituency that will bear the brunt when we exercise article 50 and, no doubt, the economy turns down as a result. Those OBR forecasts have a bearing on my constituents. I regret that I have had only three minutes to make their case since the referendum decision on 23 June. However, for all the reasons I have outlined, I will not be supporting the motion.

6.27 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Whether people like it or not, the referendum result gave the Government a very clear mandate to get Britain out of the European Union. It is extremely disappointing that some people are trying to frustrate the will of the people, whether it is hedge fund managers, with their money, taking cases to the High Court; Members of the Welsh Assembly, who now seek to parley on equal terms with Ministers and to dictate to them the terms of our withdrawal from the European Union.

I know that Ministers will be polite to Welsh Assembly Ministers, but I hope they will remind them that they owe their existence to a referendum that had a much smaller turnout and a much narrower majority than the one that has delivered us the mandate for Brexit. I hope they will remind them that the people of Wales voted to leave the European Union and that the Welsh Labour party is not speaking for Wales when it comes to my Ministers. I hope they will also remind Welsh Assembly Members from the Labour party that foreign affairs is not within their remit, and if they seek to come here and talk about foreign affairs, maybe it is time Welsh Members
of Parliament were able to discuss Welsh Labour’s appalling record on the national health service and on education; as the programme for international student assessment results have shown, Labour has left us at the absolute bottom of the educational league.

We have an absolutely first-rate Prime Minister, who has the support of her Members of Parliament, and a first-rate set of Ministers. We cannot possibly have a negotiation that consists of 650 MPs, 800 or so Members of the House of Lords and a coven of Welsh Assembly Ministers. As John Major himself said, we need to unbind the hands of our Ministers and allow them to get out there into Brussels and negotiate the excellent deal that we know they can get, which will involve freedom of movement, freedom to trade and freedom to get back control of our borders and money. We look forward to celebrating that deal over the next two years. I am very proud to support my Government tonight.

6.30 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I am intrigued to follow the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), but I would hope that everyone is willing to listen to everyone else, whether the devolved Governments or anyone else within the United Kingdom who wishes to have a say. I am pleased to be here to put some points from the Ulster Unionist party.

The people have spoken. We must listen to the people and we must do what they have said. They have asked us to leave the European Union, so we must support the triggering of article 50. I campaigned to stay in; my constituency voted—just—to leave; my little bit of the United Kingdom that I adore so much, Northern Ireland, voted to stay in; and the whole Union that I am so passionate about voted to leave. I am therefore left in the middle of everything wondering which way to go.

When I heard someone talking about “red, white and blue”, I thought, “That’s lovely—that’s great.” Then I thought, “No it isn’t—we’ve got to include how we trade with Ireland, Northern Ireland’s neighbour.” This is a phenomenally complicated step forward. We have to sort out the border. We have to look after our farmers. We have to look after our universities. There is so much at stake, and yet—

Ms Ritchie: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that the Government are respectful of all political traditions in these islands and take those points of view on board?

Danny Kinahan: I thank the hon. Lady; I could not agree more. That is exactly what I was leading up to. When we talk about red, white and blue, I want to see a big bit of green and orange. I want to see us looking after the trade with Ireland, east-west and north-south, and looking after the people in Northern Ireland who have a different point of view. I also want an end to the post-truth politics that we have all seen worldwide. I want us to be back at a point where the public can trust us and look to the integrity of politicians.

Today we are talking about whether Parliament should be scrutinising this. Of course it should. I am assuming that the Government will come back to us when they have the right things to bring back for us to scrutinise. I trust them, just as much as I trust the rest of the Opposition to make sure that they take part as well. We have all got to start working together. I want the rest of the world to see the United Kingdom united.

I hope that all Members will listen to Northern Ireland’s case. I welcome Ministers coming over to Northern Ireland and listening to us, and thank them for doing that so often when we are such a small part of the United Kingdom. I ask them to keep coming and keep listening to us. Let us all work together. My party put together the document I have here, “A Vision for Northern Ireland outside the EU”, which contains some constructive points. Everyone should be doing that. This is a time to listen and to be flexible, with everyone working together.

Something that came over to me throughout the whole of the Brexit debate was an anti-establishment mood. This is not necessarily about which side people are on; it is that we are all failing as politicians. It is about whether the pothole in the road is being repaired, and so on. People are not getting the service they want quickly. I am keen that we all pull together.

6.33 pm

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): As the Order Paper states very clearly, this debate is about the Government’s plan for Brexit, and absolutely rightly so, because we need to separate process from direction and outcomes. That is central to this debate, and many speakers have touched on it. As we have heard, if we are obsessed with process, we end up threatening our own constitution. This Parliament should be the place where big decisions are made and the place that sets the direction of travel. That is partly why I will support the motion: it includes the word “plan” and therefore, in effect, commits the Government to having a plan.

What should that plan be talking about? It has to talk about outcomes. This is not about tying the hands of negotiators, but setting out outcomes and directions of travel to get there. It is like a road map: there will be junctions and roundabouts. It is not about delaying anything or obstructing anything. It is about setting the terms that will provide the best outcomes for this country. We need a White Paper on trade. We need to understand the options and see where the Government’s thinking is going, and we need to think about transitional arrangements if they are necessary for sectors such as financial services.

We must have a sensible debate about the information and our understanding of the issues. If we think that this is about sovereignty and nothing else, imagine what will happen if we start signing free trade agreements with other nation states. Any free trade agreement is a contract that involves making commitments to another nation, and that is about sovereignty. It is not simply a question whether we are in the European Union; it is about how we conduct ourselves across the globe.

A related issue is the signal that we send out to our 27 existing partners and to the rest of the world. We are in danger of thinking of the debate as entirely domestic, but it is not, because everything that we say and do is interpreted by a lot of other key players. We need to say to them, through our debates, statements, White Papers and so on, that we have a level-headed and determined plan to make the very best of Brexit within the time that we have been given.
6.36 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I voted to remain in the European Union, as did 75% of my constituents, so it is not surprising that my inbox has been filled with questions about access to the single market, customs union, immigration, the environment and workplace protections. Perhaps the most pressing issue, which has come up over and over again, is the protection of EU nationals. Forty-six per cent. of my constituents were born offshore, and they have emailed me constantly asking about their future.

Anne, who lives in Hampstead and has done for 40 years, keeps asking me what will happen to her. Will she have to relocate? Can she live in the country that she has called her home, where she has raised her family, where she got married and where she is a community member and part of the local school, or will she have to relocate? Unfortunately, I cannot give her the answers, because the Government’s plans have been shrouded in secrecy from the very beginning. I applaud my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) for forcing the Government to say that they will publish plans and let us know what they are doing, but it is far too little, far too late. The Government should have done that a long time ago.

This is not simply a moral issue; we have to think about the benefits to our economy. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that EU immigrants to Britain are significantly younger than the national average and more likely to be in work. In Camden, which forms part of my constituency, 13% of employed residents hold an EU passport. The Government need to acknowledge not simply the moral issue about using people as bargaining chips, but the significant impact that there will be on our local economy if we do not secure the future of those who hold EU passports and live in this country. The proportion of people in my constituency who hold EU passports rises to 17% in professional, scientific and technical industries. The figure is 14% in financial and insurance services and 10% in information and communications.

I know I do not have much time, so I call on the Government and the Prime Minister to do a few things. Immediately try to secure the future of EU nationals who live in this country and who consider this country to be their home. Do not pander to the people who treated the EU referendum as a proxy vote on immigration. Stop trying to chase failed migration targets. That has not worked in the past, and it is not going to happen now. I call on the Government, the Prime Minister and Members of the House to secure the future of EU nationals living in my constituency and across the country and to put their uncertainties to rest.

6.39 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker—you have managed our debate—for allowing me to speak, because we have had lots of interventions.

I want to say a few things about this debate. First, nothing could have been clearer than the vote on 23 June. It was the largest vote that has ever taken place in the history of our country, and 17.4 million people—a larger mandate than any ever given to any Prime Minister on any issue—voted to leave the EU. We all know that the one way we can leave the EU—in fact, the only way we can effect the will of the people—is by triggering article 50. It therefore stands to reason that any attempt to delay, frustrate or obstruct the triggering of article 50 is simply to delay and obstruct the will of the people as expressed on 23 June 2016. That is self-evident to any person who cares to think about these things.

The second point is about having a plan. To me, nothing could be clearer than the Government’s position. We have said this many times. [Interruption.] Labour Members find that very amusing. I am glad to see that they find clarity amusing, because they would benefit from some clarity. The Government’s position is very simple: we want to have some restriction on freedom of movement—we want a change in the arrangements—while having the widest possible access to the single market. Those are two very simple principles. [Interruption.] Various Labour Front Benchers are chuntering from their places, but even they should be able to understand that basic position.

The third point is that our friends in the Labour party have got themselves into an awful mess on this particular issue. On the one hand, the people for whom the Labour party was created in the north and the Midlands voted overwhelmingly for out, yet the current leaders of the party—the intellectual establishment and many of the Front Benchers—are based in London, and we all know that London’s view on the outcome of the referendum was very different from the view in the traditional heartlands. The two ends of the pantomime cow are pulling apart now, and—to change my metaphors—it is very difficult to see how Humpty Dumpty can be put back together again. This is obviously causing them massive pain, but I hope that they will support the Government amendment and I look forward to seeing many of them in the Lobby in a few minutes’ time.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is a distinguished historian. Is there any precedent for the fact that the Conservative party is now a more effective representative of the views of working-class Britain than the Labour party?

Kwasi Kwarteng: There is no precedent for this. One Labour resident of Islington—a friend of mine—said to me, “The one way for the Labour party to commit suicide would be to oppose the triggering of article 50.” That is palpable, and it would be a much shorter version of Labour’s suicide note in the 1983 general election.

We must very clearly say that a lot of the words we have heard are game playing. Labour Members say they respect the will of the people, but we know that they have no intention of doing so. We know that many of them want to frustrate the will of the people as expressed in June. We know that all this obfuscation, all this delay, all the smokescreen and the dust in the eyes—all that sort of thing—is for one end and one end only: they want to stay in the EU at all costs. I say to them very plainly that the horse has bolted and that the ship has left. We are not going back into the EU, and the sooner they accept that very basic proposition, the better it will be for their constituents and for the country as a whole.

6.43 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): For the benefit of the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng),
I just want to say that the Labour party was created for people living everywhere, not just those living in the north.

In his opening remarks, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) said that he wanted to see a plan “not for the 52% or the 48% but for the 100%...in the national interest.” I am glad that the Government now agree with him. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Holworth) said, there is no mandate for what is known as hard Brexit, and there is no consensus for hard Brexit. He said that how we leave is an “urgent matter of...policy that should be...debated” and decided in this House.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) gave a clear description of how the process might work, saying: “I do not think that scrutiny and debate are a threat”. As an example of how not to do it, the Secretary of State referred to several options regarding the customs union. He said that the Government would decide whether the UK remains part of the customs union and that he would inform the House. That is not sufficient. This House must see the plan. The Government need to publish it in January so that, on issues such as membership of the customs union, that plan can be tested, debated and, if necessary, amended. That is what taking back control means. The Government are going to have to get used to it.

With control comes accountability. The Government will no longer be able to hide behind the excuse that the EU made them do something or they would have loved to intervene but the EU stopped them. The Government will need to account for their own decisions, and that starts with their Brexit plan. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) said, the plan should examine whether we remain in the single market and the customs union, the impact on our constituents, and the vision on immigration, on climate and energy and on crime and terrorism. My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) would add to that the question of the status of EU nationals. The Government cannot take the country with them if they will not tell it where they plan to go.

The charge against those of us who have proposed Labour’s motion is that we are all remoaners who are using parliamentary tricks to obstruct the progress of Britain’s departure from the EU. Even though the Government have now accepted our motion, we are accused of asking them to reveal too much or of endangering their prospects of securing the best outcome. We have been told that there will be no running commentary. In her—as ever—excellent speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) said that we need basic answers to basic questions. She raised questions that are uncomfortable for some but that must be answered, and I applaud her for that.

We accept the outcome of the referendum, and, for the benefit of the hon. Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), we respect that outcome. But this is not a game; this is serious. The future of the United Kingdom is in the balance. This is the greatest challenge for politicians of our generation, and the Government should not be surprised when responsible MPs, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) and for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) show an intense interest in and concern about how Brexit proceeds. Our constituents have set us on the course we must now follow. We, as their representatives, must ensure that their voices are heard throughout the process.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Jenny Chapman:** I will, but only once, as I am trying to wind up a six-hour debate in a very small amount of time.

**Mr Cunningham:** My hon. Friend referred to our hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey). One of the big issues in the midlands is regional aid. How will that be replaced? That is the sort of answer we want from the Government.

**Jenny Chapman:** Precisely.

We must know more than we do about the Government’s intentions. Surely, on the most important issue facing this country, that is not too much to ask. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) put it well: being clear about our objectives does not weaken us; it strengthens us. It is not just MPs who campaigned for remain who want more information; the British public, including those who voted to leave, want to know more about the plan. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) said, this is not leave versus remain; it is Parliament doing its job. Take back control, we were told. This House will have done everything possible after this evening to assure the public that we will not block article 50. We now need to gain some grip on the process. We need to see the plan. If the plan presented is insufficient, we will come back and demand more.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton) urged the Government to include a regional analysis in their plan. I wholeheartedly echo that demand. The Government say they do not want to reveal their negotiating stance before they have to and that they do not want a running commentary, but the trouble is that a running commentary is exactly what we are getting. We and our constituents are gleaning clues about the Government’s intentions from leaked correspondence, snatched glimpses of notes and the musings of the Foreign Secretary. This is unhelpful in enabling challenge, scrutiny and contributions from MPs. It is also damaging our prospects for gaining a good outcome. It is not just the British public who are listening to the running commentary; it is being heard with some irritation by officials and parliamentarians in Europe.

**Michael Gove:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Jenny Chapman:** I will not give way.

There has been a vacuum, an empty space where the plan ought to be. As the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) said, it is not good enough that acceptance of the need for a plan has been dragged out of the Government by the Opposition. I look forward, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) said, to the debate moving on to the substance of Brexit, rather than the relentless focus on process.
The motion asks for the basic plan, not the fine detail. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said, the “we know best” politics has to end. He and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) warned of the consequences of failing to talk frankly about immigration. It leads to the rise of the far right, and that cannot be allowed to happen. I congratulate them both on their speeches.

It would be profoundly wrong if Members of the European Parliament and officials in Brussels were the first to learn of the Government’s stance. If the British public had to read about the Government’s position through leaks from Brussels, it would be a most inauspicious start to the taking back of control that our constituents have told us they want.

The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who has gained admirers on all sides, says she wants a White Paper and a Bill. I hope the Minister is listening to her.

Michael Gove: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jenny Chapman: I have told the right hon. Gentleman that I will not give way.

We all know that there are those who want the hardest and fastest Brexit possible. Conversely, some MPs such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) and for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), and my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), will vote against the Government amendment. They are not Brexit deniers; they are people with genuine concerns. The Government would do well to listen to them, because that is what building consensus means.

6.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman). I thank Members who have contributed to this excellent debate on what the motion rightly describes as the defining issue facing the United Kingdom. There have been many excellent contributions on both sides. Time will not allow me to congratulate all those who have spoken, but I should say that, as a new Minister, to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Mr Lewis) and for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said, we should show respect for the enormity of this issue and its impact on all our constituents.

Members have shown that they share our concern that we prepare properly and focus on the details. Following the referendum, we are moving on from 40 years of EU membership. Carrying out this process properly and effectively is a complex challenge with a wide range of potential outcomes. That is why we are taking our time to inform and develop our negotiating strategy.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out before the House four aims: first, listening to all sides in the debate, so that we can build a national consensus around our position and get the best deal for the UK; secondly, putting the national interest first and listening carefully to all the devolved Administrations; thirdly, taking steps to minimise uncertainty wherever possible, which is why we are bringing forward a great repeal Bill to bring existing EU law into domestic law on the day we leave, and empowering Parliament to make the changes necessary to ensure our law operates effectively at the domestic level; and, finally, putting the sovereignty and supremacy of this Parliament beyond doubt by the time we end this process and have left the European Union.

My right hon. Friend has also been clear about our broad strategic aims for the negotiations: securing the best available access for our businesses, so that they can trade and operate within the single market, while taking back control of our borders, our laws and our money. I hear calls from both sides of the House—and indeed both sides of the referendum debate—for the rights of EU citizens in the UK to be guaranteed, and it is certainly the Government’s intention to do so, alongside securing the rights of UK citizens living in the EU.

In preparation for the negotiations, we are undertaking a wide-ranging programme of sectoral and regulatory analysis, talking to businesses and civil society about the options for leaving the EU and the impact on their parts of the economy. On Monday, my right hon. Friend joined the Chancellor to meet organisations in the City. From aerospace to the environment, energy to retail, farming to chemicals, tourism to automotive, fishing to fintech, and universities to ports, we have been listening to people’s concerns and seeking out opportunities for UK industries.

From the start, the Prime Minister has been committed to full engagement with the devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I commend the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) for his powerful speech on the importance of finding a UK approach and of listening to the concerns of the devolved Administrations. I undertake to do that. Others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), mentioned the Crown dependencies. I can assure them that a great deal of engagement is going on with the Crown dependencies, as it is with Gibraltar. I met representatives of the Government of Gibraltar today to make sure we were taking their concerns on board in our preparations for this process.
The motion passed by the House on 12 October made it clear that, while parliamentary scrutiny was an essential pillar in the process of our withdrawal, it should be carried out in a way that respected the will of the people and did not restrict the Government’s negotiating capability. Parliamentary scrutiny is invaluable, and it is important that our approach is scrutinised by the expertise of both Houses of Parliament, but that cannot be, as my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) pointed out so clearly, at the expense of binding the Government’s hands in negotiations. It is entirely proper that Parliament should scrutinise the Government’s approach to the process of leaving the EU, and that there be a full and continuing debate, both on the Floor of the House and in the new Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, chaired by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be attending next week.

Many hon. Members, including those on the Opposition Benches—notably the right hon. Members for Doncaster North and for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton)—have recognised that it is beyond doubt that the Government have received clear instructions from the British people that Britain should leave the EU. We are now discussing the right and proper process for withdrawal, and today’s debate will take that process one step further. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has committed to being as open as possible with Parliament, and we remain committed to providing the House with regular updates on our plans to deliver on the clear mandate given by the British people to leave.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Walker: I will not give way. I am afraid.

That brings me to the heart of the motion, which calls on the Prime Minister to commit to publishing the Government’s plan for leaving the EU before article 50 is invoked. This country stands on the threshold of a new chapter in its history. In forging a new relationship with our neighbours in Europe, we must deliver a global Britain that can continue to be a global success, as my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) suggested. The Secretary of State has said he will set out our broad plans for doing so ahead of the notification to invoke article 50, but we must do so in a way that safeguards the vital national interest by securing the Government’s negotiating position.

The Government amendment is entirely proper and I commend it to the House. I welcome the fact that Her Majesty’s Opposition appear to accept the amendment, although I note that their Back Benchers seem to disagree. Like many on both sides of the House, I fought the division of the referendum, now is the time for people to come together and work together to ensure that the UK succeeds. By supporting the Government amendment, colleagues from across the House can show that they have heard the will of the people and that we will work together to make a success of it. We can move forward with the process of making this work not just for 48% or 52%, but for 100% of the people we represent.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 461, Noes 89.

Division No. 102

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Anderson, Mr David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Ashworth, Jonathan
Atkins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barron, rh Mr Sir Kevin
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benn, rh Hilary
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Betts, Mr Clive
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Brabin, Tracy
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Brennan, Kevin
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bruce, Fiona
Bryant, Chris
Buckland, Robert
Burgen, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Butler, Dawn
Cairns, rh Alan
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carling, Mr Michael
Carmichael, Neil
Carwell, Mr Douglas
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coffee, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crausby, Mr David
Crouch, Tracey
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
De Piero, Gloria
Beckford, rh James
Davies, Glyn
Bryanston, rh James
Davies, Glyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Davies, Glyn
Bruce, Fiona
Davies, T. C.
Buckland, Robert
Davies, T. C.
Butler, Dawn
Davies, Dr James
Cairns, rh Alan
Davies, Mims
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Davies, T. C.
Campbell, Mr Gregory
The Government’s Plan for Brexit

7 DECEMBER 2016
The Government’s Plan for Brexit

Stewart, RORY
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, MEL
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Derek
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, Emily
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tohurston, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyn, Mrs Anne-Marie
Trickett, Jon
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turley, Anna
Turner, Mr Andrew
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vazezy, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watson, Mr Tom
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
White, Chris
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, Mr Iain
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Heather Wheeler and Jackie Doyle-Price

Salmont, rh Alex
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Siddiq, Tulip
Smith, Angela
Stephens, Chris
Thewliss, Alison
Thomson, Michelle
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine

Whiteford, Dr Eiliidh
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wishtart, Pete
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Owen Thompson and Tom Brake

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.
The House divided: Ayes 448, Noes 75.

Division No. 103]

AYES

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Abrahams, Debbie
Adams, Nigel
Afrifje, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allen, Mr Graham
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
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Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Ashworth, Jonathan
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Betts, Mr Clive
Bingham, Andrew
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Brazier, Mr Julian
Brennan, Kevin
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
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Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
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Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Butler, Dawn
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, rh Mr Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carnichael, Neil
Carswell, Mr Douglas
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Ciwyd, rh Ann
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
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Crouch, Tracey
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
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Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dinenage, Caroline
The Government’s Plan for Brexit

7 DECEMBER 2016

The Speaker: That this House recognises that leaving the EU is the defining issue facing the UK; notes the resolution on parliamentary scrutiny of the UK leaving the EU agreed by the House on 12 October 2016; recognises that it is Parliament’s responsibility to properly scrutinise the Government while respecting the decision of the British people to leave the European Union; confirms that there should be no disclosure of material that could be reasonably judged to damage the UK in any negotiations to depart from the European Union after Article 50 has been triggered; and calls on the Prime Minister to commit to publishing the Government’s plan for leaving the EU before Article 50 is invoked, consistently with the principles agreed without division by this House on 12 October; recognises that this House should respect the wishes of the United Kingdom as expressed in the referendum on 23 June; and further calls on the Government to invoke Article 50 by 31 March 2017.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Immigration Act 2014 (Current Accounts) (Excluded Accounts and Notification Requirements) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 7 November, be approved.—(Graham Stuart.)

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 14 December (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Road Traffic Offenders Act 1988 (Penalty Points) (Amendment) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 8 November, be approved.—(Graham Stuart.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION


7.37 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I am grateful for the chance tonight to present a further petition calling for fair transitional arrangements for 1950s-born women affected by the changes to the state pension age. That group of women is bearing an unfair burden. When the Pensions Act 2011 was debated, Ministers promised transitional arrangements to ease that burden, but those have not materialised, leaving women across the UK facing hardship, stress and worry. I am presenting a petition on behalf of the residents of Preseli Pembrokeshire. I thank all those who signed it.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Preseli Pembrokeshire,
Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

Jamie and Andy Murray: Sporting Legacy

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

7.38 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): It is an enormous pleasure to have the opportunity to speak on the sporting legacy of Jamie and Andy Murray, who hail from Dunblane in my constituency and who finish the year as the world’s No. 1-ranked players in the men’s doubles and men’s singles, respectively.

At the outset, I want to offer my personal congratulations to both Jamie and his doubles partner Bruno Soares and to Andy on what is an incredible achievement for all three of them in finishing the year as the No. 1-ranked players.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. He rightly praises the remarkable talents of Andy and Jamie Murray, but is he aware that Scotland has another world No.1 tennis player—Gordon Reid, the wheelchair world champion? He is a worthy champion, who, having developed his skills at Helensburgh lawn tennis club, went on to win the Australian open and Wimbledon in 2016, before being named world No. 1.

Steven Paterson: I am grateful for that intervention. Had my application for the debate been put in three or four days later, Gordon’s name would have been included—he had not yet achieved No. 1, but then he did, and I am very pleased that he is recognised now. Of course, he is a product of not only Helensburgh but Stirling university, and I will say something about that later.

These congratulations extend to the crucial network of support that Andy and Jamie have in their family and coaches, who play a vital role in supporting these athletes in their preparation for tournaments and in their recovery after them. In Judy Murray, who was here in Parliament earlier at a meeting I was at, we have someone who is a family member and a coach all rolled into one, and she must be immensely proud of her sons’ achievements.

The scale of these achievements can best be demonstrated in simple terms—just by looking at the records of the players. In Jamie Murray, we have the first British man in 44 years to win the US open doubles, alongside his partner, Bruno Soares. As well as the US open, the pair also won this year in Sydney, before winning the Australian open, so it has been a magnificent year. At the present count, Jamie has no fewer than 16 career titles to his name.

So far in his career Andy has won 44 singles titles. These include three grand slams; 14 masters 1000 series titles, which places him ninth on the all-time list; two Olympic gold medals; and, just a few weeks ago, the title at the Association of Tennis Professionals tour final here in London. He also has two doubles titles with Jamie and an Olympic silver medal in the mixed doubles with Laura Robson.

Back in 2014, I was able to play a small part in recognising Andy’s achievements at that point, when, as a councillor, I was able to vote in favour of conferring the freedom of the city of Stirling on him at a ceremony.
in Dunblane—his home town. The freedom of the city is the highest civic honour Stirling has, allowing him the ancient right to march through the centre of Stirling with drums beating, colours flying and bayonets fixed, as well as the right to drive his sheep through the city, which I am sure he is planning on very soon.

In my contribution, I intend to consider what I see as an appropriate legacy for the tremendous sporting achievements of Jamie and Andy Murray.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Jamie and Andy Murray are two very proud Scotsmen, but they are cheered on from across the United Kingdom. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the entire United Kingdom can take great pride in their magnificent achievements?

Steven Paterson: I am grateful for that intervention because it allows me to say that in Andy and Jamie Murray we have international stars in the world of sport. They are respected and supported across the world for their achievements. They are the No.1 players in tennis.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Like you, Mr Speaker, I come to the debate as a very keen tennis player, which is why I applaud the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) for bringing forward this Adjournment debate. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) that the Murrays have really helped to move tennis right on in this country—not just in Scotland, but across the board. They are an inspiration to young children, as is Judy Murray, who has helped to coach many young children and to set up many programmes. My own children started playing at the age of two in many of those programmes, which Judy Murray was key in setting up with the Lawn Tennis Association. I applaud the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate, and I applaud everything the Murrays are doing that represents the nation.

Steven Paterson: The point is well made, and I will go on to say that the point of the debate is to see how we can build a fitting legacy for Jamie and Andy Murray.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I would like to pay tribute to the Rutherglen lawn tennis club in my constituency, which does a superb job in promoting the game of tennis and which works to help more people to enjoy this fantastic game. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should all do our bit to encourage more people to take up the sport so that, hopefully, we will have more Andy Murrays and Jamie Murrays?

Steven Paterson: Yes, indeed. There are clubs all over the country—not just Rutherglen—that are doing that, and my hon. Friend’s intervention speaks for all of them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing this debate. Jamie and Andy Murray are an inspiration for many young tennis stars in my constituency who, over the past month or so, have been playing tennis in Greyabbey, Ballywalter, Donaghadee, Newtownards, and Comber. In all those places, young people are inspired by the skills of Jamie and Andy Murray within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Steven Paterson: That is right.

This debate is about investing in this legacy and considering how it is to be achieved. I see that, first, in terms of developing the sporting infrastructure and facilities that allow future generations of athletes to achieve the heights the Murray brothers have reached, and—who knows?—perhaps even to challenge the considerable records of these two fine tennis players. Secondly, just as importantly, it is about widening access and opportunities for everyone to participate in sport.

I want to say this about the values that sport can instil: sporting competition is a good thing. I took part in lots of sports when I was at school and since, from football to athletics to karate—although regrettably not tennis, I am afraid—and I always played to win. I was at school at a time when there was a movement saying that sporting competition was perhaps somehow a bad thing because it meant there were losers as well as winners. I rejected that thesis then and I reject it now. There are tangible benefits both to children and adults in participating in competitive sport.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I heard this week about Thornliebank, Giffnock, Braidbar and St John’s Primary Schools in my constituency joining a number of others in attaining a Sport Scotland gold award. Part of the inspiration for them, particularly the children from Thornliebank, was playing tennis with Judy Murray. It is vital that children have the opportunity to do as my hon. Friend says and participate in all kinds of sport.

Steven Paterson: Absolutely. There are obviously particular physical benefits as we face a generation where obesity is a major issue. There are also mental benefits in terms of setting and achieving goals, and the hard work that has to go into being successful in sport.

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman is making a good point about the benefits of sport. Perhaps he read about the recent survey by the British Journal of Sports Medicine—that was reported in The Daily Telegraph and various other papers last week—that said that playing racket sports, but particularly tennis, reduces one’s risk of death at any given age by 50%, so I think that Mr Speaker, as a keen tennis player, has many, many years ahead of him. That makes the point that we should do everything we can to encourage more people to take part in this sport.

Steven Paterson: Yes indeed. I did not read that, but it does not surprise me. There are clear benefits to participating in sport. I am sure that Mr Speaker is extremely pleased by the hon. Lady’s mention of him.

I was talking about the fact that there are winners and losers in competitive sport. Losing is part of life, just as it is part of sport, so it is important to learn what it is to get back up and win next time. That is a really important point that is sometimes overlooked in relation to competitive sport and why we should support it. Anyone who has followed Andy Murray’s career, in particular, can only be inspired by his reaction to heart-breaking losses at various times. That has forged him into the formidable champion, and world No. 1, that he is today. It is important to take the lessons from sport into other parts of life.
Sports infrastructure is integral to affording opportunities to young sportspersons to develop their skills and maximise their potential. You may be aware, Mr Speaker, that Judy Murray is currently awaiting a decision following a public inquiry into a planning application for a world-class tennis centre at Park of Keir on the outskirts of Dunblane that would include a tennis academy to nurture the next generation of tennis players. I do not intend to comment directly on the application, because that is not appropriate. It will be determined on the basis of the relevant planning legislation once the planning reporter makes their recommendation. However, I wholeheartedly support the concept of a tennis academy that can be created as a lasting legacy of the Murray brothers and provide the opportunity for the champions of the future to realise their potential. Speaking as the Member of Parliament for Stirling, and someone born and bred in the Stirling area, I sincerely hope that the academy can proceed and benefit local children and young people from the Dunblane and Stirling areas.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this debate to the Floor of the House. As a graduate of the University of Stirling, I can speak from first-hand experience about the fantastic facilities in his constituency that I benefited from as a student. Does he agree that just as formal spaces for children and young people are important, so are informal spaces? In recent years, there has been an encroachment on our civil spaces, with signs saying “No ball games”, and the areas in which children may play has been reduced. Does he agree that it is important that children are encouraged to get out into our communities and to play in the streets and local parks?

Steven Paterson: That point is extremely well made. When I was growing up, “No ball games” signs seemed to be on every patch of grass and piece of ground. It is no surprise that football, for example, is on the wane in Scotland, as it has been for some time. I think it is partly because of the situation that my hon. Friend has described, and we need to turn it around.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing the debate to the Chamber and being so generous with his time. Given the athleticism that is required to be world No. 1 in any sport, he may be disappointed to hear that I am not related to the Murrays. The hon. Gentleman is talking about facilities. Will he congratulate Liberton High School in my constituency, where the headteacher, the parent council, the staff and pupils came together to deliver new tennis courts at the school, to provide those facilities for the future?

Steven Paterson: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. That was part of the discussion that we had at our meeting earlier today, and we will take it forward. I am conscious of the fact that time is racing on, so I will make some progress.

Stirling University is, as has been mentioned, Scotland’s university for sporting excellence. There has been a lot of investment in facilities, including the National Tennis Centre, a facility well known to the Murray brothers and to Gordon Reid. As Scotland’s university for sporting excellence, Stirling is committed to developing a lasting sporting legacy in the community and beyond. One of the ways in which it does so is through coaching. I understand that Judy Murray was on campus yesterday delivering the Tennis on the Road programme, which trained more than 20 students to deliver starter tennis lessons in primary schools.

The university works in partnership with Tennis Scotland and the Tennis Foundation, which is responsible for disability and education tennis. As part of that partnership, the university has two graduate tennis co-ordinators who study for masters degrees part time and work in graduate assistant roles at the university. One has responsibility for supporting grassroots tennis and getting more people into the game. The other delivers coaching for students and staff below team level from beginner upwards, as well as running tennis-based fitness classes. As far as widening access to the local community is concerned, more than 250 people—from three-year-olds to people in their 50s, and everything in between—come to the campus on a weekly basis to take part in the community programmes. Some excellent work is going on there.

I am conscious of the time, and I do not want to eat into the Minister’s time or anyone else’s.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) on securing tonight’s debate, and to Gordon Reid. As Scotland’s university for sporting excellence, there has been a lot of investment in facilities, including the National Tennis Centre, a facility well known to the Murray brothers and to Gordon Reid. As Scotland’s university for sporting excellence, Stirling is committed to developing a lasting sporting legacy in the community and beyond. One of the ways in which it does so is through coaching. I understand that Judy Murray was on campus yesterday delivering the Tennis on the Road programme, which trained more than 20 students to deliver starter tennis lessons in primary schools.

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Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend for taking an intervention. In case he did not know, in September this year Andy Murray held a sporting tournament in Glasgow, at which he raised £305,000 for charity. Half the money went to UNICEF UK to help children in Syria and the other half went to Young People’s Futures, an incredible organisation in Possilpark, in my constituency. It operates on a tiny little budget, and the money has made such a difference to it. We should all thank Andy Murray for not forgetting that his fans got him where he is, as he has said, and for paying them back in such a way.

Steven Paterson: That says everything about Andy, Jamie and the family. It is exactly the kind of approach that they take: they use their positions to do the right thing. Jamie and Andy Murray richly deserve their legacy after years of dedication and hard work in tennis. As I said two weeks ago in this Chamber, the Murray brothers are the pride of Dunblane, and we salute their superb achievements in the sport, in reaching the pinnacle of tennis and becoming world No. 1s.

I hope that we continue to build on the enthusiasm and inspiration that these sporting heroes generate for tennis and, indeed, for other sports. I hope that we will develop and enhance sporting facilities and increase the accessibility of sport for everyone, irrespective of their background. If we succeed in doing so, the legacy of Jamie and Andy Murray’s sporting achievements will be to make them the trailblazers of a golden generation of sporting champions. That is a goal we should set ourselves and achieve.

7.53 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to the Chamber and being so generous with his time. I wholeheartedly support the concept of a tennis academy that can be created as a lasting legacy of the Murray brothers and provide the opportunity for the champions of the future to realise their potential. Speaking as the Member of Parliament for Stirling, I can speak from first-hand experience about the fantastic facilities in his constituency that I benefited from as a student. Does he agree that just as formal spaces for children and young people are important, so are informal spaces? In recent years, there has been an encroachment on our civil spaces, with signs saying “No ball games”, and the areas in which children may play has been reduced. Does he agree that it is important that children are encouraged to get out into our communities and to play in the streets and local parks?

Steven Paterson: That point is extremely well made. When I was growing up, “No ball games” signs seemed to be on every patch of grass and piece of ground. It is no surprise that football, for example, is on the wane in Scotland, as it has been for some time. I think it is partly because of the situation that my hon. Friend has described, and we need to turn it around.

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I hope that we continue to build on the enthusiasm and inspiration that these sporting heroes generate for tennis and, indeed, for other sports. I hope that we will develop and enhance sporting facilities and increase the accessibility of sport for everyone, irrespective of their background. If we succeed in doing so, the legacy of Jamie and Andy Murray’s sporting achievements will be to make them the trailblazers of a golden generation of sporting champions. That is a goal we should set ourselves and achieve.

7.53 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to the Chamber and being so generous with his time.
and I thank him and the Minister for allowing me to make a contribution. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for ensuring that the debate was scheduled this evening immediately following the hearing of the all-party group on Scottish sport with Judy Murray and Blane Dodds, the chair of Tennis Scotland, on the Murray legacy. May I put on record my thanks, and that of the all-party group, to Judy and Blane for attending the hearing? It was a fascinating talk, and it was an absolute privilege for us all. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for attending the meeting as well. That was much appreciated.

The all-party group on Scottish sport is keen to offer as much assistance as possible to support the growth of tennis in Scotland, and it is anxious that we do not miss the opportunity to build on the success of the Murray family. The success of the Murrays is fantastic for Scottish and British tennis, and we have all—none more than you, Mr Speaker—enjoyed watching them rise to become the best tennis players in the world. However, the story of their path to success raises some serious questions about the state of British tennis, and how about supportive the system has been and is for emerging talent.

Following the final of the European under-16 championships and after receiving advice from a young Raymond Moore, a 15-year-old Andy Murray realised that if he was to become the tennis champion that he is now, he would have to move away from the UK. The infrastructure to support emerging talent was very poor. The lack of indoor courts combined with coaching issues and the horrendous British weather meant that British tennis could not support his development as a player. That was 14 years ago and, sadly, the situation has not improved as much as we would have hoped or expected. The best way in which we can live up to the legacy of Andy and Jamie is to ensure that young people, regardless of their background, have access to facilities and coaching, and to ensure that promising young tennis players do not have to travel abroad to access appropriate facilities and elite coaching.

As we have heard, Scotland well and truly punches above its weight in tennis. Not only are Andy and Jamie world No. 1s, but it was confirmed last weekend that Gordon Reid is the end-of-season world No. 1 in men’s wheelchair tennis. Scotland currently provides the Davis cup captain and the immediate past Fed cup captain, Leon Smith and Judy Murray herself. However, despite our world-leading position, serious questions and concerns exist about how tennis in Scotland is supported; hence the decision of the all-party group to investigate what work is being done to establish a Murray legacy. The picture, to this point, is not good. Despite Scotland having 8.5% of the UK’s population, Tennis Scotland only receives just under £800,000 of funding from the Lawn Tennis Association, despite its budget of £63 million. That represents 1.3% of the LTA budget.

The Scottish weather is well known and well loved, we might say—[Interruption. / Hon. Members are correct to say that that is, indeed, a huge exaggeration. Despite our climate, however, we do not appear to have our fair share of accessible indoor tennis courts. In fact, according to a BBC report, there are only 102 indoor tennis courts in Scotland compared with 1,494 in England. That is not just the responsibility of the LTA; it is the responsibility of all politicians, Governments, local authorities and governing bodies to ensure that we have the correct facilities to cater for the needs of any youngsters who want to pick up a racket and start playing tennis.

During the meeting, Blane Dodds said that we have one court for 48,000 people in Scotland, whereas it is one for 26,600 people in the rest of the UK. He also said that the need, demand and opportunity are greater in Scotland than anywhere else in the UK and that partnership working and multi-sport facilities will be key as we move forwards. I am not the constituency MP, so saying this is not so incumbent on me as it is on my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling, but Judy Murray’s excellent proposal for a multi-sport facility at Park of Keir near Stirling is exactly the sort of project that should be supported if we are to make real progress. This exciting proposition represents a huge investment, and I wish her luck in securing approval for it.

Politicians are quick to send out a tweet to congratulate the Murray brothers on their success, and it is only right and proper that we acknowledge their success and the contribution they have made to Scottish and British sport. However, the most fitting way that we can respect, acknowledge and celebrate the success of the Murrays is by establishing a Murray legacy to ensure future generations benefit from the success of Andy and Jamie.

During the meeting, Judy spoke passionately about the urgency of the situation in that we risk losing this great opportunity forever and of her frustration at the governing bodies. She talked about how she started Tennis on the Road, which amounted to Judy and another coach going around the country in a van loaded with equipment. Managing to utilise that small resource, Judy and her coaching partner coached more than 8,000 people. She said that we need more vans, coaches and courts, but that such facilities need to be accessible to all. She wants the country to benefit from her 25 years of coaching experience. She closed by saying that, at the end of the day, we need the LTA to release more money for tennis in Scotland.

In conclusion, now is the time to cement a legacy from the achievements of Andy and Jamie. It is incumbent on all politicians and governing bodies alike to ensure that the unique opportunity to build on the success of the Murrays is not missed.

Mr Speaker: I thank colleagues very warmly for what they have said, and I think they will be thanked outside this place as well. Follow-through is key of course.

7.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I thank the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) for taking this opportunity to formally celebrate two of our great British sportsmen. I also thank the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) for his contribution.

I am sure you will agree, Mr Speaker, that it is a pleasure to take some time out to reflect on success and give credit where it is due. Like yourself, I have followed tennis through the years—the highs, the lows, the expectant British crowd and the frustrating near misses—so I feel pretty lucky to be the Minister for Sport in an era of such success for these two great players. If I may, I will add a third great player to the mix—Gordon Reid, who has already been mentioned and whose achievement in becoming the world No. 1 wheelchair tennis player last weekend by making the final of the Wheelchair Masters
[Tracey Crouch]

at Lea Valley was phenomenal, especially after winning the Paralympic singles in Rio alongside Wimbledon and the Australian Open.

Andy Murray’s achievement in becoming the world No. 1 tennis player of 2016 is an incredible testament to his dedication, professionalism, skill and sheer will to win. In winning both Wimbledon and Olympic gold for the second time, Andy’s place as one of Britain’s all-time sporting greats is assured. To win both tournaments and then defeat Novak Djokovic at the World Finals in London last month to retain his No. 1 position is nothing short of incredible. That does not even begin to cover his exploits representing Great Britain with such distinction in the Davis cup, which I will come back to later.

Beyond his achievements on the courts, Andy is also a genuinely nice guy, making him an inspirational role model to many. Members may recall that Andy was chosen to carry the Union flag at the opening ceremony of the Olympics. The night before the ceremony, we had a photo call with the flag, which was enormous. He managed to drape it over Princess Anne, making news bulletins around the world. I was lucky enough to be on the other side, and remained free from what was basically flag carnage. We ended up having a long chat while we were waiting for all the photographers in the bank to get ready and get their positions. Afterwards, people asked me what I had talked to Andy Murray about for so long—whether it was tennis tactics, or investment in the future, and so on. I confess that Andy and I were talking about the babies we had left behind—his daughter and my son were born within a few days of each other. We often forget that international sports stars’ dedication and commitment quite often take them away from their families. To still achieve the great deal that he did in Rio, despite that being the case, is something else we should applaud and appreciate.

The debate rightly recognises the contributions of both Murray brothers. Jamie has climbed to the top of the doubles game without perhaps the same level of public scrutiny and expectation. His profile was raised after winning the 2007 Wimbledon mixed doubles with Jelena Jankovic. Since then, his increased success in men’s doubles, winning the Australian and US Opens this year, has culminated in his and his partner’s rise to become the world No. 1 doubles pair at the end of 2016.

I thought the sibling rivalry in my childhood was something, but sibling rivalry must be quite special in the Murray household, when one brother holds two Wimbledon titles but the other won theirs first. As my sister is not in a position to answer back, I think it is only fair that the record shows that I always won.

The sheer dedication it has taken for Jamie and Andy to reach the pinnacle of their sport has been immense. But talent must be nurtured and supported. Of course, not every aspiring tennis player is raised by Judy Murray—that might be a hard task even for her—but her inspirational leadership, nurturing her sons’ talent and enthusiasm, along with her six years as GB Federation cup captain, has led the way to a new golden era in British tennis. Her work on the Department’s Women and Sport Advisory Board has also played a leading role in championing women’s sport. If I end up being half the mother that Judy is, I will be extremely proud.

One of the most notable contributions that the Murray brothers have made to tennis in this country was made together. The Davis cup win of 2015 was Great Britain’s first for 79 years. Both Murray brothers played crucial roles in that historic win, as did the fans who in both London and Glasgow ensured a roaring home crowd. While 2016 saw a narrow loss to Argentina in the semi-finals, I look forward eagerly—as, I think, many other hon. Members do—to the 2017 competition.

Such global victories have undeniably made Andy and Jamie catalysts for British tennis at home. The chasing pack of other British tennis players has undoubtedly linked to the inspiration of having such world-class role models on our team. With Kyle Edmund, now in the top 50 and rising, and other leading doubles players such as Dominic Inglot improving their rankings, the Davis cup is certainly looking healthy for Great Britain for many years to come. Gordon Reid is inspiring teammates in wheelchair tennis. As well as winning singles gold in Rio, Gordon won silver in the wheelchair doubles with teenager Alfie Hewett, who is seen as a future world No. 1. I congratulate Great Britain’s fourth world No. 1 of 2016, quad tennis player Andy Lapthorne, who won silver in the quad singles in Rio and bronze in the doubles alongside Jamie Burdekin.

UK Sport’s record investment in Paralympics GB paid further dividends with Jordanne Whiley and Lucy Shuker taking bronze in the women’s doubles.

Rebecca Pow: Will the Minister give way?

Tracey Crouch: I do not have time, I am afraid. I would if we had a longer debate.

I must mention some more of the recent successes that British women have been enjoying. Johanna Konta’s meteoric rise to the world’s top 10 has been a fantastic development for her and the women’s game. With Heather Watson and Naomi Broady improving steadily and Laura Robson returning after injury, British women’s tennis is proving to be very healthy.

These players are an inspiration to up-and-coming players and the grassroots of the game in this country. Sport England statistics show that over 428,000 people play tennis at least once a week—over 20,000 more since London 2012. Disabled player numbers have increased by nearly 50% since 2012, rising to over 30,000.

Sport England and sportscotland support the LTA in its objective to increase participation in the sport through their current £17.4 million investment. Since 2010, Sport England has invested £8.2 million in 278 national lottery-funded projects. The hon. Member for Stirling is right to mention that Stirling University is home to the Scottish National Tennis Centre. It is very important in the development of Scottish tennis, which is being enjoyed by both the public and promising Scottish players.

The LTA provides support to British players and tennis generally across the United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman mentioned some of the projects and schemes being funded. Following the Davis cup victory, the LTA launched Tennis for Kids to inspire five to eight-year-olds to pick up a racket and play for the first time—perhaps not the two-year-olds my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) mentioned—and over 13,000 children were introduced to the sport through a free six-week training course and given a free racket to keep playing.
Time is very short, but it is important to remember that the great Union between us has been the cornerstone of our prosperity in the past and it is vital to our future success. Andy and Jamie Murray are a wonderful illustration of that success both now, when at the pinnacle of their sport, and in the future, when they will continue to inspire millions across the United Kingdom and beyond. They are a credit to their country, our country, their sport and their family. I congratulate them again on their phenomenal performances in 2016 and look forward to further great achievements in the years ahead.

*Question put and agreed to.*

8.8 pm

*House adjourned.*
House of Commons

Thursday 8 December 2016

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Modern Slavery

1. Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of prosecutions for modern slavery.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): We have the strongest legal framework in the world, including the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which came into force in July last year. The Law Officers are supporting the Prime Minister’s taskforce on modern slavery, and the Crown Prosecution Service continues to see a year-on-year increase in the numbers of prosecutions.

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. and learned Gentleman seeks to group Question 1 with Questions 6 and 8.

The Solicitor General: Forgive me, Mr Speaker. I make that application to group the questions in that order.

6. James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of prosecutions for modern slavery.

8. Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of prosecutions for modern slavery.

Mr Speaker: Good; and the hon. Gentleman may be learned, but if not, I am sure it is only a matter of time.

Andrew Stephenson: One of the main areas of modern slavery that we are uncovering in Lancashire is the trafficking and subsequent sexual exploitation of women. Often these victims will not come forward because they are being controlled through fear and violence. What more can my hon. and learned Friend do to support vulnerable women through the process?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. The CPS has been instrumental in developing special measures to help people with vulnerabilities to give evidence, such as the pre-recording of cross-examination, ground rules hearings that are held ahead of the trial in order to avoid inappropriate questions, and evidence via remote link. All such measures help to increase confidence that support will be there for victims.

Mr Speaker: I call James Cleverly. Not here. I assume the hon. Gentleman was notified of the intended grouping. In that case, where on earth is the fella?

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): On the train.

Mr Speaker: No doubt.

Seema Kennedy: Can my hon. and learned Friend tell me a bit more about what the Crown Prosecution Service is doing to prosecute this type of offence in the north-west of England?

The Solicitor General: I note my hon. Friend’s interest as a north-west MP, and I am happy to tell her that under the new modern slavery offence, eight charges were laid in the north-west region and eight offences in the Mersey-Cheshire region, plus other offences under older legislation, in the past year. Only last month three people were convicted of modern-day slavery and human trafficking in Liverpool and were sentenced to a total of seven years and three months’ imprisonment.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Many of the prosecutions were the result of the European arrest warrant playing an important part. Will the Solicitor General, with the Home Office, ensure that the European arrest warrant remains a useful tool, whatever the outcome of Brexit negotiations?

The Solicitor General: The right hon. Gentleman is right to note the huge importance of the European arrest warrant in streamlining the process. That, together with other tools to encourage close co-operation not only between countries in the EU but more widely abroad, is a vital means by which we can deal with what is an international crime.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The Modern Slavery Act review published a few months ago noted that although it is national Crown Prosecution Service policy that all trafficking and exploitation cases be referred to the complex casework unit, in practice the policy is not always followed. What subsequent measures have been put in place to reduce the number of cases that could slip through the cracks in that way?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady is right to point out that important review, which I am glad to say is forming a key part of the Prime Minister’s taskforce. At all levels, proper emphasis is being placed on the serious nature of this type of offending. Let us not forget that other types of offence that encompass such behaviour need to be dealt with as well, so the complex case unit has a key and increasingly important role in the prosecution of such crime.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Solicitor General is responsible for the prosecution of traffickers, not for the detection of them or for their sentencing. What are the main barriers to his securing successful prosecutions?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to say that these are challenging offences. The problem is that very often the victims of this type of crime take a while to realise that they are in that position. When they come
forward, they want a consistent approach from the authorities that gives them support when they come to give evidence. That is the emphasis of the CPS and other agencies, and with that increasing support we are seeing those barriers increasingly being removed.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): rose—

Mr Speaker: It is very good to see the hon. Gentleman back in his place.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The independent review commissioned by the Prime Minister that the Solicitor General has referred to expressed concern about the insufficient quality and quantity of intelligence at national, regional and international level, which it is said hampers our operational response. What steps does the Solicitor General think can be taken to ensure that our exit from the European Union does not further hamper our operational response?

The Solicitor General: May I first welcome the hon. Gentleman back to his place at what is a very challenging time for his family? We give him our very best wishes.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to talk about international working. He will be glad to know that the taskforce, in the form of the National Crime Agency and the other agencies, is placing heavy emphasis on the need to improve that intelligence gathering. When our exit from the EU happens, I firmly believe there will be mechanisms in place to ensure that that important work carries on unimpeded, whether by way of mutual legal assistance or some of the other mechanisms we have opted into, which will no doubt be an important part of the negotiation in the months ahead.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very grateful to the Solicitor General for his kind words and good wishes to my family at this time.

The Solicitor General has set out that our membership of the European Union gives us access to a toolkit, including the European arrest warrant, which was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson), and which the Director of Public Prosecutions referred to as absolutely vital. However, there is also access to agencies such as Eurojust, where we have one of the busiest desks. What will the Solicitor General do to ensure that we quickly negotiate a new relationship with Eurojust, rather than ending up in Switzerland’s position, where the negotiation took seven years?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to emphasise other mechanisms. Eurojust and the European investigation order are other mechanisms that may be relevant. Clearly, they have to form a central part of any negotiation and be a priority for the negotiating team when it comes to the details. As he knows, the CPS is well aware of this issue and has been raising it, and the Law Officers will, of course, play their part in raising these important issues.

Hate Crime

2. David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of prosecutions for hate crime.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): We are committed to tackling hate crime in any form. Forgive me, Mr Speaker, may I apply for this question to be grouped with Questions 5 and 7? The numbering has changed.

5. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of prosecutions for hate crime.

7. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of prosecutions for hate crime.

The Solicitor General: As I was saying, Mr Speaker, the cross-Government hate crime action plan, published in July 2016, focuses on the reduction of hate crime, the increasing of reporting, and ensuring that all criminal justice partners deliver the appropriate outcomes for victims.

Mr Speaker: I realise that, as a distinguished lawyer, the hon. and learned Gentleman’s speciality is words—preferably a large number of them—rather than numbers.

David Rutley: Like many others in the Chamber, I was very concerned about the spike in the number of racial and religiously aggravated offences after the referendum. Will my hon. and learned Friend please tell the House whether that trend has continued in recent months?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. I think we were all concerned about the spike that clearly occurred after the referendum. The total number of racial and religiously aggravated offences reported in July this year was 41% higher than in the previous year, but I am happy to report that the number of such reported offences has now declined and is at similar levels to before the referendum.

Sir David Amess: Will my hon. and learned Friend look carefully at the law relating to abusive and offensive online posts? Often when I look at the remarks that are made, particularly when someone has died, I find it quite incredible that newspapers host them, and I think these cowards should have their names and addresses printed along with the offensive posts.

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend raises a proper point of increasing concern. I assure him that anonymity—perceived or real—is not an escape route for perpetrators. The use of false online profiles and websites still means that people are traceable, and they can and will be pursued. I was very concerned about the rise in the number of such reported offences after the referendum. Will my hon. and learned Friend please tell the House whether that trend has continued in recent months?

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I am glad to note that there has been a rise of 44% in the number of prosecutions for disability hate crime generally in the last year. When it comes to learning disabilities and autism, I am a strong supporter of local advocacy groups, which will often be the first port of call when a complaint is made by people with an impairment. The evidence shows that where the police work with these groups, more people with a learning difficulty will come forward, and I want to see this good practice spread much further.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): But given that on the ground in north Wales the number of prosecutions generally is falling, how can we ensure that public perceptions are reflected in prosecuting policy so that more individuals who commit crime get taken to court and dealt with by magistrates, who tell me that their courts are empty?

The Solicitor General: I am following the position very carefully in all parts of England and Wales. The hon. Gentleman is right that there are some areas, such as his, where there has not been the rise in prosecutions that we have seen in others. We have to further encourage consistency. The training that has been rolled out in recent months to all the CPS areas needs to bed in. With that approach, I think we will see a rise across the board not just in the prosecution of these offences, but in the confidence of victims to come forward.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Solicitor General agree that prosecution of hate crimes is helped when the victim is supported enough to give evidence, and that more training must be provided by the teams that deal with hate crime UK-wide to ensure that all possible support is afforded to victims and their families?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman knows from his experience in Northern Ireland that the Leonard Cheshire Disability organisation has an excellent scheme in place to support victims. This echoes the point that I made earlier about the need for such best practice to be spread to give better support.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the Solicitor General would agree that regional variations in conviction rates for disability hate crime are unacceptable. Will he set out how such convictions will be dealt with, so that they will not depend on where a person lives?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to reiterate the points that have been made. I assure him that the training that is being provided applies to all CPS regions; it is being done on a national basis. That means that in whatever part of the country it is, there should be the same awareness and understanding about the sensitivities that apply to disability hate crime, and of the need to stop looking at people with disabilities through the prism of credibility; rather, we need to look at the person beyond the disability, understanding that their voice has to be heard.

Criminal Corporate Liability

3. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What the Government’s policy is on prosecutions relating to criminal corporate liability.

Nigel Mills: I am grateful for my right hon. and learned Friend’s answer. I know he has had a busy week. I am sure he is aware that there is real concern that our regime has made it much harder to prosecute senior directors of companies that have been involved in very serious wrongdoing. When he gets on to this consultation—perhaps he could say when that will be—will he look at other regimes such as that in the US, to see how they have performed better than we have?

The Attorney General: I hope it is no disrespect to my hon. Friend to confirm that he is not the most intimidating tribunal I have addressed this week. He is entirely right that we should look at examples abroad, as well as at domestic practice, to make sure that we are doing all we can to deal with corporate criminal offending. He is right, too, that we must address the issue of whether it is easier to prosecute those in charge of small companies than those in charge of large companies because of the complexity of the latter’s management structures, because that cannot be right.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): During the passage of the Criminal Finances Bill, the Government have so far refused to extend corporate economic crime beyond tax evasion. Does the Attorney General agree that companies should only be criminally liable for failure to prevent tax evasion?

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady’s question reflects precisely why we are asking for evidence on this subject. We will then conduct a consultation to see whether there is a case to extend the type of “failure to prevent” offences that she describes beyond bribery, where it currently exists, and tax evasion, where it will shortly exist, assuming that Parliament passes the Criminal Finances Bill. There is an argument to say that we should look at this, because, as I say, there are other types of offending where it would be sensible to consider whether a “failure to prevent” offence would be appropriate.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The late Professor Gary Slapper, the well-known commentator and columnist who sadly died at the weekend, was a considerable crusader for informing the law on corporate responsibility. It would be a tribute to his memory if we were to work on that.

Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that we should also look at two other matters? The first is the so-called Magnitsky arrangements for freezing the assets of those involved in corruption. Secondly, in order to enforce that, we must maintain the operational independence of the Serious Fraud Office.

Mr Speaker: I hope that three points satisfy the hon. Gentleman’s palette.
The Attorney General: I will attempt to remember them all, Mr Speaker. I agree with my hon. Friend that it is worth looking at his first point. There are many people who believe that there are gaps in the law, but it is also important to make sure that we take full account of concerns that will be expressed about the burdens placed on businesses of all kinds if we get that balance wrong.

On asset freezing and asset seizure, my hon. Friend is right to say that if we are going to successfully prosecute and convict those who are engaged in criminal activity, we must also make sure that we can recover assets where appropriate, so we will look at that in the course of the process in which we are engaged.

Leaving the EU: Human Rights

4. Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the protection of human rights in the UK. [907737]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The United Kingdom has a proud tradition of respect for human rights that long predates the European Union and that will continue following our withdrawal from it.

Marion Fellows: What existing human rights enjoyed by UK citizens under EU directives could not or should not be enshrined in UK law, if or when we leave the European Union?

The Attorney General: As I hope I made clear in my first answer, I do not believe that human rights protections in this country are dependent on EU law. We will certainly look, in the course of the great repeal Bill and other measures that this House will have to consider, at how we transfer those obligations currently under EU law into domestic law where the House believes that it is appropriate to do so. I maintain the view that we will continue to protect human rights in this country. Moreover, we will continue to be leading advocates for human rights around the world.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Is it still the Government’s policy to introduce a separate Bill of Rights to enshrine things in British law?

The Attorney General: We remain of the view that human rights law requires reform. I think that my hon. Friend and I are in full agreement that, although we have no quarrel with the content of the European convention on human rights, it is the way in which that document is applied that gives us difficulty. The Government are certainly committed to seeking to do something about that. He will have noticed that we have a few other things on our plate at the moment; I think we will have to resolve those before we can resolve the matter to which he refers.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): What assurance can the Attorney General give that, once we exit the EU and become once again an emancipated, independent and liberated nation state on the stage of the world, we will maintain the proud heritage and tradition of defending individual rights in this United Kingdom?

The Attorney General: I entirely share the hon. Gentleman’s confidence. We will certainly do that; we always have and we always will, and we will do it in all parts of the United Kingdom. As he knows, we will make sure that all parts of the United Kingdom are engaged in the process of exiting the European Union.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that, when referring to our exit from the European Union, it is important to distinguish between that and the convention, and that the Government’s policy continues to be that we should remain in the European convention and observe human rights as before?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is entirely right: those two things are distinct. It is our exit from the European Union that the public have confirmed in the referendum outcome and that we will now follow through. Of course, as I said earlier, our commitment to human rights will be maintained not just domestically but abroad.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Careers Advice: Girls

1. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve careers advice to girls and reduce the gender pay gap. [907756]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): Careers guidance should help all young people to get the inspiration and the advice and guidance that they need for success in working life. We want to see schools giving not only impartial careers advice and guidance, but high-quality guidance. That is why we are investing £90 million over this Parliament to improve careers provision for young people.

Sir David Amess: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that good-quality careers advice is essential. Are there any further plans for the Government to remove barriers for women when they progress with their careers, particularly when they have young children?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that. When we look in detail at the gender pay gap, we see that the situation for people who start a family often presents the biggest challenge that we face in reducing the gender pay gap further. We have given more than 20 million employees the right to request flexible working. We are providing shared parental leave, because childcare is not just an issue for women; it is an issue for men as well. My hon. Friend will know that we have committed to doubling the free childcare provided for working parents of three and four-year-olds from 15 to 30 hours a week.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Government commit today to publishing their response to the Women and Equalities Committee report on the gender pay gap before the House rises for the Christmas recess? The report was published in March this year.
Justine Greening: It is an important report, and we have taken time to consider it carefully. The hon. Lady will be aware that we laid gender pay gap regulations before the House in recent days, and we will be publishing that report very shortly.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Are the Government as committed to eliminating the part-time gender pay gap as they are to eliminating the full-time gender pay gap?

Justine Greening: We want that to take place. The full-time gender pay gap has never been narrower than it is today, but it is important that we look beyond that and understand that people working part time have the same right to no gender pay gap.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree that although the gender pay gap has reduced, the fact that the pay gap for full-time workers is at a differential of 13.9% indicates that much work still needs to be done? Has she considered a penalty system for employers who do not comply?

Justine Greening: We try to work with employers on a voluntary basis. This is not just about forcing employers, although we have laid gender pay gap regulations on transparency before the House. It is about business understanding why they have an interest in fixing this issue in the first place. Yes, we are bringing in mandatory reporting, and we laid regulations on that before the House in the last few days, but we want business genuinely to grasp the nettle and understand why the issue matters so much.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Female part-time workers enjoy 6% more pay than do their male equivalents. At a time when we are encouraging men to take more of their fair share of childcare responsibilities, is the Secretary of State as concerned as I am by the fact that the excellent Equal Pay Portal is worried that the gap is increasing over the long term?

Justine Greening: What is interesting is that we have seen people’s work habits and routine change over recent years. We want to see no gender pay gap, irrespective of which gender is disadvantaged. Historically, this has been a significant issue for women, rather than men, but we want to see no gender pay gap, irrespective of gender.

Rail Companies: Disabled Passengers

2. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that rail companies provide on-board visual and auditory displays for disabled passengers. [907757]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The provision of an audio-visual passenger information system is mandatory for all new trains, and it has been since 1999. For older trains, operators have until 1 January 2020 to fit an AV passenger system. Currently, 70% of the fleet operated on the main line has been either built compliant or upgraded to be compliant, and the rest of the fleet will be upgraded or replaced by 2020.

Maria Caulfield: How can we encourage staff on our railways to make announcements on the trains to help visually impaired passengers when visual displays are either not fitted on the trains or, as is the case most of the time, not working?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. It is a condition of an operator’s passenger licence that it must publish a disabled persons protection policy. That covers how the needs of visually impaired, deaf or hard of hearing people are met with regard to AV systems, including in times of delay or disruption. DPPs have to be approved by the Office of Rail and Road. Additionally, disability awareness training is mandatory for all customer-facing staff and managers in train operating companies.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): This week, the all-party parliamentary group for disability published an informative report on measures to close the disability employment gap. One of the issues raised by disabled people is the cutting of benefits, which reduces their independence and results in the removal of their Motability vehicles. When will the Government reverse this disabling policy?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Lady raises a very important question. I will have to look into this matter and reply to her in writing.

Mr Speaker: It is a very important question, but, unfortunately, it is somewhat different from the question on the Order Paper. That may explain the Minister’s need to undertake some important research, the fruits of which I am sure we will witness in due course.

Mirs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Having a disability-accessible train service is hugely important, but disabled people need to be able to get to the train station in the first place. What is the Minister doing to make sure that local authorities have a more consistent approach to making our built environment more disability-accessible, particularly in making sure that we have more consistency in shared space schemes?

Andrew Jones: Shared space schemes are a very controversial area, and their name does not help people. With shared space schemes, local authorities are trying to remove some of the visual clutter and improve the built environment, but that cannot be done at the expense of disabled people. In the Department, we have a work group that, with the Chartered Institute of Highways and Transportation, is looking at good practice in this area, and it will publish its report shortly.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Making audio-visual information on public transport mandatory for buses is overdue. Will the Government confirm that they will accept the amendment to the Bus Services Bill, which is going through the Lords?

Andrew Jones: The Government tabled an amendment in the Lords to introduce AV displays for buses. The Bill has finished its passage through the Lords, and I think it will be introduced in this House in the new year. We are very keen on the amendment, and we were very pleased to get it into the Bill.
FTSE Companies

3. Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of women on boards and at senior executive levels of FTSE companies.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): When companies have a senior team that better reflects the customers they serve, it is simply better for business and makes good business sense. Since 2010, we have more than doubled the number of women on boards in the FTSE 350. We have now committed to 33% of the members of the boards and executive committees of those companies being women by 2020.

Oliver Colvile: I welcome the work that Plymouth University in my constituency has done to ensure that there are more women on its governing body. As well as the work the Government are doing with FTSE companies, what steps is the Department taking to ensure that more women are on the governing bodies of universities across the country?

Caroline Dinenage: Plymouth is always a trailblazer—as we know, one of my hon. Friend’s predecessors was Nancy Astor—and Plymouth University is clearly no exception. I commend the work that the university is doing. Female leaders in universities and colleges are very powerful role models who are inspiring the next generation. We welcome the last WomenCount report on higher education, which showed that a third of governing bodies are now gender-balanced, and we support the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s aspirational target of 40% of women on governing bodies.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The fact that female representation on boards is rising is certainly welcome, but the number of female executive directors is still ridiculously low, accounting for less than 10% of the total number of directorships in the FTSE 100 and less than 6% of the total in the FTSE 250. How are the Government encouraging those companies to promote diversity within their executive pipelines?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady makes an absolutely excellent and very important point. We want more female executives on boards, which is why the Hampton-Alexander review requirement for work on the pipeline is so vital. It is also why the target of 33% female representation on executive committees and on the committees that report to them by 2020 is so important.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that successful women entrepreneurs—I am thinking of people such as Leah Totton, of “The Apprentice” fame, from Northern Ireland—are projected as role models, particularly for young females who aspire to follow in their footsteps?

Caroline Dinenage: It is absolutely vital that we celebrate successful female entrepreneurs. There are now more female-led businesses in this country than ever before, but we know that if women were starting up businesses at the same rate as men, there would be 1 million more of them. That is why it is absolutely vital that we celebrate those fantastic entrepreneurs—through the Careers and Enterprise Company, for example—as role models for the next generation.

Sex and Relationships Education

4. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What plans the Government have to update their guidance to schools on the provision of sex and relationships education to include (a) LGBT relationships issues and (b) sexual harassment in schools.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): The sex and relationships education guidance was issued in 2000. MPs from all parties, including those in the Chamber who have held my position during the past 16 years, know that this is a complex area and that we need a thoughtful and measured approach to updating the guidance. I made it very clear at the Education Committee that we are actively looking at the SRE guidance to ensure that all young people are supported in developing healthy and respectful relationships.

Ruth Cadbury: As the Secretary of State outlined, five Commons Select Committee Chairs, countless children’s charities, MPs across this House, experts and academics agree that good-quality statutory age-appropriate relationships education in schools will provide children with the knowledge and resilience they need to develop healthy and respectful relationships, and will ensure that they are less vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence. The Government have finally accepted that the current quality and accessibility of SRE are not good enough; will they amend the Children and Social Work Bill to introduce good-quality statutory SRE that applies to every school?

Justine Greening: We have already set out the fact that we are actively looking at the SRE guidance. It was first brought in 16 years ago, and we all recognise that the world that children are growing up in now is very different from that world. The hon. Lady’s question raises in particular LGBT relationship issues and sexual harassment. Those are important areas where we can do better. I am very proud of the Government’s record on LGBT issues and bringing forward same-sex marriage, but it is an important area and is one that we are looking at.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): A young trans person in England is, sadly, three times more likely to have self-harmed and almost twice as likely to have attempted suicide as their peers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that more should be done to improve LGBT sex and relationship education in schools to support all students to understand better and be compassionate, to help reduce those shocking statistics and the often heartbreaking outcomes for those young people?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is right. No child should suffer the kind of discrimination and harassment she mentioned. In September we set out £2.5 million of funding over the next three years to focus in particular on tackling homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in schools. It is important that, alongside education, we are clear that we need to change attitudes as well.
Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I appreciate the Secretary of State’s answer on the SRE guidance. It is indeed almost 17 years out of date. At the last Women and Equalities questions she said she would “provide an update shortly”; now she is carefully “looking” at it. She is right that the guidance is completely out of date. It does not include anything on the internet or online grooming—it does not mention grooming full stop, let alone exploitative relationships. I wrote to her last month about this but she has not replied. Children in this country are waiting for a reply on when they will get proper sex and relationships guidance. Will she please answer now?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady wrote to me on 17 November. I will of course respond to her letter. In addition, we have been very clear that we want to see how we can make progress in this area. However, as many questions have underlined, it is very complex, with many different aspects that we need to work on very carefully to get right. Although I know that within this House there have been some excellent reports underlining some of the areas where the guidance should be updated, there is also a broader debate in the country about the right way to do that. This matter needs to be handled very sensitively. That is why we will make sure we take the time to get the process right and then set it out to MPs.

State Pension Age

5. Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): If she will discuss with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions the provision of further transitional support to women affected by the increase in the state pension age.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): If she will discuss with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions the provision of further transitional support to women affected by the increase in the state pension age.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is fully aware of the issue, which we debated in this Chamber just last week. He has clearly stated that the introduction of further transitional arrangements cannot be justified given the imperative to focus public resources on helping those in most need. There are no plans to go beyond the £1.1 billion concession introduced when Parliament considered the changes.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for that response, disappointingly predictable as it was. Will she tell me whether anyone in Government has done an analysis of how much it would cost to implement transitional measures by comparison with what it will cost the Government reputationally and financially when the Women Against State Pension Inequality take them to court and win?

Caroline Nokes: Consistent is how I would prefer to describe my answer. The Government have looked into a variety of different proposals that have come forward in many forms, both from the WASPI campaign and from Opposition parties. As I have very clearly stated, we will not make any further transitional arrangements.

6. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What steps she is taking to encourage more women to take up scientific professions.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): It is vital that we encourage talented women into scientific careers. Those working in science, technology, engineering and maths careers on average earn a pay premium of 19%. Ensuring that women work in STEM careers will also help to tackle the gender pay gap. Role models are absolutely crucial for young women, and some 40% of STEM ambassadors are women.

I would like to take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to Tim Peake, who did an amazing job of working with schools while he was on his space trip earlier this year. I have met many, many schoolchildren who have had their interest in STEM stimulated from the work he did while on his space trip.

Sir Desmond Swayne: In a free market, the shortage of science teachers to inspire young women would be addressed by a rising wage. It is worth a try.
**Oral Answers**

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**Employment Tribunal Fees**

7. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of the introduction of employment tribunal fees on access to justice for women.

**Caroline Dinenage:** The hon. Lady has made her point very clearly. I will speak to the MOJ, and we will get back to her as soon as possible.

**Topical Questions**

T1. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the effect of the introduction of fees for employment tribunal proceedings.

**Chris Elmore:** How can the Minister possibly believe that a budget reduction of 70% will enable the Equality and Human Rights Commission to fulfil its statutory functions, and why have the Government continued to refuse to complete a full equality impact assessment of the implications of the cuts for the work of the EHRC?

**Justine Greening:** The EHRC performs an important and valuable role, and its chair, David Isaac, and his board are well equipped for this task. The commission receives, and will continue to receive, sufficient funds to enable it to fulfil its full range of statutory duties.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): Research from Guide Dogs has shown that 42% of surveyed assistance dog owners were refused carriage by a taxi driver in the past year, despite its being illegal. Ministers in the Department for Transport are showing great determination to address this wholly unacceptable discrimination, including through enforcement and education. What will the Minister’s Department do to support these efforts?

**Justine Greening:** Assistance dogs are vital to the independence of many disabled people, and their continual refusal by a minority of taxi and private hire vehicle drivers is inexcusable. I am grateful to the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), for his commitment to addressing this issue and eliminating this discrimination. My hon. Friend makes a profound case, and my Department will do all it can to support this important work.
Paula Sherriff: We have commissioned research revealing that as of the autumn statement 86% of net savings to the Treasury since 2010 through tax and benefit measures had come from women—an increase on the last autumn statement, when the figure was 81%. When will the Minister deem this issue serious enough to warrant action from the Treasury—when the figure reaches 88%, 90%, 100%? And when will she agree to listen to the EHRC and the UN, among others, and publish a cumulative gender impact analysis of the Government’s policies?

Justine Greening: One of the best things we can do to help women financially is to make sure we have a strong economy, and that is precisely what we have done, hence the record employment levels for women, which are good news. The hon. Lady’s question missed out our raising of the personal allowance, which has disproportionately helped lift women out of tax altogether.

T3. Richard Graham: One of the changes to the state pension that everyone should welcome, but which is not as well known as it should be, is the recognition given to the years spent by women bringing up children, which now count as a national insurance credit towards a full state pension. Will my hon. Friend update the House on the number of women starting to benefit from this and its estimated value during a mother’s retirement?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery: By 2030, over 3 million women stand to gain on average £550 extra per year as a result of these changes. For women reaching state pension age in 2016-17, their median net income in retirement is estimated to be approximately £207,000. This is more on average than women have ever received.

T6. Kerry McCarthy: According to Age UK, there is clear evidence that older people with cancer are too often under-treated, owing to judgments made on the basis of their age rather than their overall health and fitness. Age discrimination in the NHS is illegal under the Equality Act 2010, so will the Minister tell us what discussions she has had with colleagues in the Department of Health about a plan to improve cancer survival rates for people of all ages?

Caroline Nokes: As the hon. Lady will know, the Department for Work and Pensions has recently published the work and health Green Paper, and we are looking at working very closely with the Department of Health on a whole range of issues to make sure that older people and our pensioners are treated fairly by all Government Departments and services.

T4. Chris Davies: A little earlier, my right hon. Friend stated that she did not wish to see a gender pay gap, so what steps are the Government taking to reduce it?

Justine Greening: Eliminating the gender pay gap remains an absolute priority for this Government. Transparency is one of the most important and powerful tools for shaping behaviour and driving change. That is why we will be requiring large employers to publish their gender pay gaps. Draft regulations were laid on Tuesday 6 December, and if Parliament approves this legislation, which I hope will happen, the regulations will commence in April 2017.

T7. Peter Dowd: Does the Minister agree with the Resolution Foundation that cuts to the work allowances of universal credit risk undermining work incentives for disabled people? Should not those cuts be reversed now?

Caroline Nokes: As the hon. Gentleman will know, changes were announced in the autumn statement to the taper rate of universal credit. The reality of our changes to the welfare system is that universal credit is encouraging more people into work, and once they are in work, it is helping them, via our work coaches working in every single jobcentre, to make sure that they get more work and indeed better work.

T5. Mrs Maria Miller: Research shows that nine out of 10 parents tell us that they want sex and relationship education in our schools to be compulsory. Do the Government agree with them?

Justine Greening: I very much welcome the report that my right hon. Friend’s Select Committee published on this issue. That is precisely why we want to look actively at this issue. She will know from our recent meeting that I think it important to have SRE that works for the 21st century. It is indeed time to look at this, and I am very conscious of the House’s overall view that this is a matter that we should now take on board. My right hon. Friend will know from her previous role as the Minister for Women and Equalities that it is a complex issue, but we are looking to see what we can do to address it.

Martyn Day: The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has found that this Government’s pursuit of an austerity agenda, resulting in cuts to benefits, meets the threshold for human rights violations of disabled people. What are the Government going to do to rectify that?

Caroline Nokes: The Government are committed to providing support for disabled people who need it, as reflected in the fact that spending to support disabled people and people with health conditions will be higher in real terms in every year to 2020 than it was in 2010. The core intention of the recommendations set out by the UN is already incorporated in UK policies, and our response sets that out in more detail.

Bob Blackman: My right hon. Friend has committed to issuing by the end of the year a consultation document on the future of caste discrimination legislation. Will she update us on when that document will be released?

Justine Greening: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, and he is absolutely right that we intend to issue a full public consultation shortly on how best to provide the legal protection that we want to see against
caste discrimination. When we do that, I am sure that my hon. Friend and his community will want to participate fully in the consultation.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): It took the Government almost a year to come up with a very thin eight-page review on the care and management of transgender offenders. That referred to “a number of events linked to transgender prisoners” that attracted attention last year. Those so-called “events” were, in fact, the deaths in the space of a month of two transgender women held in men’s prisons. Will the Minister tell us why the Government failed to acknowledge those tragedies in their review, and why their proposals are so meagre?

**Caroline Dinenage**: I question all those statements. The response is not meagre; it is thorough. The Government are firmly committed to ensuring that transgender offenders are treated fairly, lawfully and decently, and that their rights are respected. A revised instruction drawing on the conclusions of the Ministry of Justice’s “Review of care and management of transgender offenders” was published on 9 November. It is already being applied, and will be implemented fully by 1 January.

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): In the two months between 14 September and 15 November, the tax credits of 24,219 families were reinstated after being unfairly removed by Concentrix. What work have the Government done to assess the impact on women—particularly single mothers—who have been disproportionately affected?

**Justine Greening**: The hon. Lady has raised an important issue. My hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury decided not to renew the Concentrix contract precisely because of some of those challenges, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend contacts her with further details relating to her specific question.

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**LEADER OF THE HOUSE**

The Leader of the House was asked—

**Barnett Consequentials: Estimates Process**

1. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What parliamentary mechanisms are available to hon. Members to scrutinise Barnett consequentials within the estimates process.

   The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): Every Member has an opportunity to vote in the estimates process. The Liaison Committee is the body that has been chosen by the House to represent the interests of the House in selecting topics for debate on estimates days. If Members wish to examine a particular estimate in relation to the effect that it has on the block grant or for one of the devolved Administrations, they are free to make representations to the Committee; and, are, in fact, encouraged to do so.

   As Members know, the Procedure Committee is currently conducting an inquiry into the estimates process, to which my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House recently gave evidence. We look forward to its report, and will examine its recommendations carefully.

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**Alan Brown**: The simple fact is that the OECD has previously said that we have some of the worst levels of estimates scrutiny in the developed world. The EVEL process makes it even harder for Scottish Members to participate in decisions that can have Barnett consequentials, and we were promised that the estimates system would be reviewed for that reason. What changes will be introduced, and when?

**Michael Ellis**: I do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman’s question. What with oral and written questions, Opposition day debates, Backbench Business day debates, business questions and Select Committees, there are doubtless more opportunities for Members to raise these issues than there were when Mr Barnett invented Barnett consequentials in the late 1970s. Many avenues are available. As I have said, however, the Procedure Committee is looking into the matter in some detail, and I invite the hon. Gentleman to take part in that inquiry. [Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker**: It is good of the Leader of the House to drop into his own questions session. We are immensely grateful.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): The floods of 2013 were devastating in Somerset, and my constituency covered half the flooded area. The Somerset Rivers Authority was established to deal with flood resilience, and the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government gave assurances that the authority could be funded through a precept on our council tax bills. May I have an assurance that work on the framework for such an arrangement is under way?

**Mr Speaker**: Order. That is absolutely fascinating material, especially in Taunton Deane, but I question whether it has any particular relationship with the issue of Barnett consequentials. I am sure that that is a matter to which the hon. Lady will devote her grey cells in the hours that follow.

**Alex Salmond** (Gordon) (SNP): A few seconds ago, the Deputy Leader of the House cited this question time as an appropriate mechanism for scrutiny of Barnett consequentials. Will he therefore tell us what the current Barnett consequential is for the health service in Scotland?

**Michael Ellis**: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the blocks of sums that are allocated to the different Departments in Westminster have no bearing on what the Scottish Government can do in respect of the breakdown for the departmental heads. He is comparing chalk and cheese.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Will the Deputy Leader of the House tell us how many days are allocated to the Scottish National party for Opposition day debates, and will he encourage the SNP to devote its next debate to Barnett consequentials?

**Michael Ellis**: More than enough days are allocated to the Scottish National party, but I know that SNP Members have heard what my hon. Friend said.
September 2017 Sittings


Michael Ellis: It is always very tempting to spend time in Wellingborough, with or without my hon. Friend. The reality is that there have been decades of under-investment; there is a huge amount of work in utilities, including electrics, sewerage, telephones and every manner of utility and facility in this House. It is very far from clear that an extra couple of weeks, even were they to be allocated, in the summer would be sufficient time. But in any event, on the exact point my hon. Friend makes, the reality is there will be a debate on this matter and ample opportunity to discuss it.

Topical Questions: Northern Ireland

3. Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): If he will allocate time for topical questions to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Michael Ellis: It is always very tempting to spend time in Wellingborough, with or without my hon. Friend. The reality is that there have been decades of under-investment; there is a huge amount of work in utilities, including electrics, sewerage, telephones and every manner of utility and facility in this House. It is very far from clear that an extra couple of weeks, even were they to be allocated, in the summer would be sufficient time. But in any event, on the exact point my hon. Friend makes, the reality is there will be a debate on this matter and ample opportunity to discuss it.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Deputy Leader of the House for that response, but would he not accept that especially with regard to Northern Ireland, although a number of issues are indeed devolved, there are very serious issues that are not devolved, and there have been occasions—some could argue yesterday even—when very important issues could do with being raised during Northern Ireland questions? So will he reconsider allowing just 10 minutes of topical questions? I am not really sure what harm that could do.

Michael Ellis: The concern has been that questions could be ruled out of order by the Chairman or that they might not be answered substantively, and that less time would be available for questions that had been balloted for in the usual way. This is simply an attempt by the House to ensure that the time is allocated as efficiently as possible.

Mr Speaker: I have no idea who this Chairman is, but I will give the matter a bit of thought and see if I can work it out.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have every sympathy with the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) is proposing. Mr Speaker, but you are always very kind and assiduous in ensuring that all right hon. and hon. Members from Northern Ireland get a chance to ask our questions. If we had topical questions, that would reduce those opportunities. Could we instead have more time for Northern Ireland questions?

Michael Ellis: There is pressure on the time in the House and we have a six-week cycle for questions to each Department. However, these matters are always carefully considered and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House and I will certainly take on board the hon. Gentleman’s comments.
Business of the House

10.35 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for next week will be as follows:

Monday 12 December—Remaining stages of the Savings (Government Contributions) Bill followed by debate on a motion relating to the welfare cap.

Tuesday 13 December—Remaining stages of the Neighbourhood Planning Bill.

Wednesday 14 December—Opposition day (16th allotted day). There will be a debate entitled “The disproportionate negative effect of the Government’s autumn statement and budgetary measures on women” followed by debate on homelessness. Both debates will arise on Opposition motions followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to counter-terrorism.

Thursday 15 December—Debate on a motion on creation of a commercial financial dispute resolution platform followed by a general debate on broadband universal service obligation. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 16 December—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 19 December will include:

Monday 19 December—General debate on exiting the EU and science and research.

Tuesday 20 December—Debate on a Back-Bench business motion, subject to be confirmed by the Backbench Business Committee, followed by general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for coming to the House today. He has had a very busy week. Margaret Thatcher said that everyone needed a Willie. She was referring to Willie Whitelaw, and the Leader of the House is rapidly becoming the Willie Whitelaw of this Government. He is there whenever anyone needs him.

The Leader of the House helpfully published the dates for Easter, May day and Whitsun under Standing Order No. 25 on Monday. May I press him for one more date? He failed to say when the House would rise for the summer recess. Some people are suggesting that it will be on 20 July, but we are not sure.

Yesterday the Government finally accepted that they needed a plan, a strategy and a framework. The Leader of the House said yesterday that the Opposition were “quarrelling like Mutiny on the Bounty” as re-shot by the “Carry On” team.”—[Official Report, 7 December 2016, Vol. 618, c. 208.]

I am sure that the British Film Institute is wondering where this genre falls! I should like to remind him that it was the intention of 40 Government MPs to support yesterday’s Opposition motion that resulted in the Prime Minister conceding—from Bahrain—the Labour motion. Where was the tarantula? The spider was missing, too. As ever, the message is confused. The Chancellor is saying that we are going to be out of Europe but that we will actually be in and paying for it. So we are out but we are in; it sounds like Government hokey cokey.

The situation is confusing for everyone, including our farmers. May we have a debate on the effects of exiting the EU that are causing concern to our farmers? In 2014, the UK exported £12.8 billion of products to the EU, which was approximately 73% of our total agri-food exports. May we have a response to the letter to the Prime Minister signed by 75 organisations asking for tariff-free access to the single market and a competent reliable workforce? Those organisations want protection for food safety, security and hygiene, and proper stewardship of our countryside, and they say that affordable food will be at risk if Ministers fail to deliver continued access to labour and the best possible single market access.

May we have a debate on the report on opportunity and integration? If this Government were serious about opportunity and integration in this country, they would reverse the £45 million cut in English for speakers of other languages, which affected 47 colleges and 16,000 learners. I know of a learner under ESOL who learned English, learned to drive and is now a driving instructor—oh, and she just happens to be a Muslim woman. Members around the House will be able to find similar examples of people taking opportunities as a result of ESOL. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Government restore grants to local authorities, so that libraries, community facilities, the provision of skills training, and prevention work with families are not cut? Will he also ensure that they restore the migration impacts fund, which was set up by the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown and then cut by the coalition Government in 2010? It was included in the 2015 Conservative manifesto as the “controlling migration fund”. They can change the name, but they have not yet introduced it.

We must support our schools and ensure that the Equality and Human Rights Commission remains funded, independent and able to scrutinise the equality impact of policies and legislation. As we will celebrate Human Rights Day on 10 December, may we have a debate on protecting the Human Rights Act, which is an important piece of legislation? Some have argued that the UN declaration that became the European convention on human rights was just a moral code with no legal obligations, but the Human Rights Act gives it legal force. Every right that was incorporated in the Human Rights Act was systematically violated during the second world war.

Given that it is soon Human Rights Day, will the Leader of the House follow up on the Prime Minister’s response to the request from my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a British national imprisoned in Iran? If the Foreign Secretary is too busy trying to learn who his counterparts are, perhaps we can ask the United States, which signed that agreement with Iran. We need the Human Rights Act to protect basic freedoms—every day, everywhere.

There have been two electrical overload near misses on the parliamentary estate and we still, through no fault of our own, cannot turn off the lights in Norman Shaw South. Will the Leader of the House update us on that?

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the Speaker’s chaplain Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin both received awards this week. The whole parliamentary family acknowledges and congratulates them.
As for Her Majesty’s Opposition, we will be carrying on regardless—[Laughter.] Wait for it. We will carry on regardless, trying to secure economic and social justice for all British people.

Mr Lidington: May I join in the congratulations to your chaplain on the recent award, Mr Speaker? I also wish the shadow Leader of the House many happy returns for yesterday.

We will try to give the summer recess dates as soon as we can, but it is not usual for them to be announced at this stage in the parliamentary year. I looked into the situation regarding the lights in Norman Shaw South after the hon. Lady’s question last week, and my understanding from the House authorities is that there was a serious fault in what is frankly an obsolete electrical circuit system. They had hoped to get the repairs done this week, but I will ask the relevant executive in the House service to write to the hon. Lady with the latest returns for yesterday.

The hon. Lady alluded to the Casey report on integration, which I hope to see coming out of that report—[Laughter.]—and a growing shared understanding, across party political lines and around the country, of the fact that these problems are not capable of solution by an Act of Parliament, a ministerial speech or a tweak to a spending programme here and there. We are talking about problems of the self-segregation of communities that have deep cultural roots, and we have to work out locally and nationally how those should best be addressed.

The hon. Lady made a few points about other items of spending. I have to say to the Opposition that they cannot both attack the Government for not moving quickly enough to reduce the deficit and also criticise every action that is designed to obtain savings and pay that deficit down. We are having to take tough decisions now because of the failure of the housekeeping of Labour Ministers when they were in charge for 13 years.

Finally, we have a proud tradition of human rights in this country, but that existed and was strong long before the Human Rights Act. There was no magic to that piece of legislation, and this Government are committed to keeping human rights at the forefront of all our policies. I agree on the importance of the case of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and I hope that the Government in Iran will show mercy towards her and bear in mind the fact that her little daughter has been separated from her parents for so long. British Ministers and officials are doing everything they can on behalf of the family to try to bring this case to the outcome that we all wish to see.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): The Royal Bank of Scotland has announced its latest round of NatWest bank branch closures, which will have a significant impact on my constituency, as well as on the constituencies of many colleagues across the country.

Rochester, which is a key commercial town, will be left with only one bank in the centre. This has been a running theme across the country as we have seen the number of bank branches reduced by half in the past 25 years. Will the Government make time for a debate on the wider impact of these closures on the elderly, the disabled, and small businesses and retailers, which rely on these very important services?

Mr Lidington: I completely understand why my hon. Friend is speaking up so strongly on behalf of both domestic bank customers and businesses in her constituency. Of course what the banks will say is that more and more of us, both as individuals and businesses, are moving to online banking services, and that therefore reduces the viability of the branch network. Ultimately, these are commercial decisions for the banks, but I hope that when bank directors and managers think about the impact of a proposed closure on a particular town, they will take carefully into account the impact on communities, particularly on people and those businesses that cannot simply go online for the banking services that are so essential to their needs.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. It is good to see him back in his more familiar habitat of business questions after his exertions yesterday at PMQs. It was such a stellar performance that I and several of his hon. Friends are thinking about a DL for PM campaign—a sort of “Carry on Lidington” when it comes to PMQs.
[Pete Wishart]

It is another week and another instalment of Brexit cluelessness and chaos. Now we have it under the banner of a red, white and blue Brexit. After the Labour party weekly followed the Government’s article 50 agenda yesterday, it will be the red, white and blue Brexit v. the tartan remain. Now that Labour has more or less caved in on the article 50 agenda, why does the Leader of the House not just bring forward a proper vote and end the circus in the Supreme Court? What is stopping him doing that now?

On that same theme, some remarkable things have been said in the Supreme Court, most notably from the Government’s top legal officer in Scotland, Lord Keen, who told us that the Sewel convention was merely a political act and that this House can simply override the views of Scotland. I was in this House during the passage of the Scotland Act 2016, and I remember speaking on it at length—I also remember the Tories voting down every single amendment that we put forward. In particular, I recall that a motion that said that the Sewel convention would be in statute was passed by this House. We also agreed on the permanence of the Scottish Parliament. As massive disrespect has been shown to the views of Scotland, I would like to hear what the Government’s views are on all this.

This week, the lords debated the size of the House of Lords. It was like watching be-ermined turkeys voting on the size of their Christmas pens. Now that the House of Lords has managed to secure a debate on the size of their Christmas pens. Now that the House

Mr Lidington: I think that I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his opening remarks. I always think it is very dangerous when one is being prayed in aid by a senior Opposition spokesman in that way.

On the points that the hon. Gentleman makes about Europe, we must not forget that, even in Scotland, 40% of the population voted to leave. I can assure him that the Government will be looking for a Brexit that is, yes, red, white and blue, but that pattern includes the flag of St Andrew, and the saltire’s interests will be very much in our minds throughout those negotiations. That is why—to take one example—we have just established a new Government Committee, along with the three devolved Administrations, which is chaired by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU, to ensure that the three devolved Administrations have access regularly and at ministerial, not just official, level to those who are leading the negotiations on behalf of the entire United Kingdom, and that their interests are fully taken into account and understood.

The hon. Gentleman questioned me about the court case. Although I will not comment on ongoing judicial proceedings, I will simply say that the High Court judgment did raise important questions about the scope of prerogative powers and the relationship between the Executive and the legislature that we believe need to be decided through the appeal to the Supreme Court. The High Court decision required not just a resolution to be passed by this House or by both Houses of Parliament, but primary legislation. Clearly, as I have said before, we will have to await the Supreme Court’s decision, but the ministerial code and the civil service code oblige the Government at all times to obey the rule of law.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for giving me two bites of the cherry, and apologies for standing at the wrong time earlier, which goes to show how confusing this place is. Thank you for being so generous.

The floods of 2013 were devastating in Somerset, and my constituency covers half the area affected. The Somerset Rivers Authority was established to deal with future flood resilience. The then Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the then Secretary of State for the Environment gave assurances that the authority would be funded by a precept on council tax bills. Can my right hon. Friend give me an assurance that the legal framework for that is being established?

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Lady is requesting a statement on the matter.

Mr Lidington: Anyone who remembers the TV coverage of those dreadful floods in Somerset will understand why that was such a searing experience for my hon. Friend’s constituents and those of other hon. Friends representing the county. The Government have, of course, given additional funding to the local authorities directly affected so that they can make the necessary provision for future flood management. My hon. Friend calls for that sum effectively to be ring-fenced and handed over to the precepting powers of a new statutory rivers authority. The Government remain committed to the action promised by David Cameron when he was Prime Minister and we intend to legislate as soon as parliamentary time is available.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that on Monday and Tuesday this week the House rose somewhat earlier than scheduled, as Government business had come to an end. I know that the Leader of the House does not have a crystal ball, but I wonder whether we can work together to schedule reserve Backbench Business debates for such eventualities in the future. Members would accept, obviously, that if the Government business ran to time, those Backbench Business reserve matters would fall, but it would be useful to have reserve Backbench Business debates for such eventualities.

On a constituency matter, my constituent Jawad Dar came from Pakistan, where he had witnessed a double murder, for which the perpetrator was imprisoned in 2004. The murderer was released after six years and Mr Dar fled to this country in 2012 when other witnesses to the original crime were themselves murdered. By then the perpetrator had become the mayor of the region. Since 2012 Mr Dar has wrongfully been accused and convicted in absentia of crimes that he could not have committed because he was here in this country. The Home Office accepts all this as fact, yet has inexplicably determined to send Mr Dar back to face almost certain death in Pakistan. I implore the Leader of the House to urge Home Office Ministers to review this case urgently in the name of the British values of fairness, justice and mercy.

Mr Lidington: On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, I am happy to have a discussion with him about that possibility, although as he acknowledged in the way that he framed the question, it is very difficult for
Government business managers to understand in advance how much time Members from different Opposition parties and, for that matter, from our own Back Benches are going to want to spend debating particular amendments on Report, how many Divisions they may seek, and so on.

On the constituency case, although I do not know the details I will ask the Home Secretary to take a close look at it, as the hon. Gentleman asks.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): The proportion of secondary schools that are good or outstanding in the north-west has increased by 3%, by comparison with a national increase of 13%. Can we have a debate on what measures we can put in place to support northern white working-class boys and girls so that they can achieve their true potential?

Mr Lidington: I point my hon. Friend towards Education questions on 19 December. The point he makes echoes the argument made in a speech earlier this week by Sir Michael Wilshaw, who drew attention to the gap in achievement between northern and southern England and called for a much more resolute, determined exertion of leadership in schools, local authorities and other agencies in the north, to drive up standards. I am sure that my hon. Friend will do all he can to champion that effort.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): After the past week, it would be hard to deny that the Secretary of State for Transport is doing anything other than making a huge partisan mess of managing our railways. Gовia Thameslink also manages Great Northern and the Hertford loop, which affects many thousands of my constituents. This is the largest franchise let by the Department for Transport. If the Great Northern franchise is going to go the way of Southern, which increasingly looks to be the case, we will have a further, even greater disaster on our hands. Can we have an urgent debate in this Chamber on what measures we can put in place to support northern white working-class boys and girls so that they can achieve their true potential?

Mr Lidington: I completely understand why the hon. Gentleman, as a London Member, makes that case so vehemently, but, as I said a moment ago, there are interests to be borne in mind of communities outside Greater London who depend utterly on those same routes for their own journeys to work. The Department for Transport wants to work to jointly with TfL to get the best deal for passengers both inside and outside London.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In recent days there has been further media coverage about the risk of fires in certain models of the Vauxhall Corsa. It is welcome that the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency is looking into this again, but may we have a statement from a Transport Minister on what the Department is doing to co-ordinate activities and reassure owners?

Mr Lidington: I will make sure that my hon. Friend’s concerns are understood by the appropriate Minister at the Department for Transport and ask the Minister to write to him as soon as possible.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): When can we discuss the injuries suffered in sport? We will then have a chance to congratulate the Welsh Rugby Union and England’s Rugby Football Union, which have reacted positively to the new medical knowledge of the deadly long-term effect of early Alzheimer’s on those who...
suffer repeated blows to the head. Could we also look to the suggestions made here last week that we need international action throughout the rugby world and the boxing world to recognise that practices that have been tolerated for a long time should no longer be permitted, so as to allow these sports to be made acceptable to younger generations?

Mr Lidington: It is right that it should be primarily for the sports’ governing bodies to take the lead on this. I am sure that since they are so keen to recruit young men, and increasingly young women, to these sports, they want to be able to say confidently that the rules that they have in place do everything that can be done to protect the safety of competitors. I will ensure that Ministers at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport are aware of the hon. Gentleman’s comments. DCMS questions, including to the sports Minister, are coming up on Thursday 15 December, so he may well have another bite at the cherry then.

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, the biggest social issue facing our country is that of dementia. Only too often, dementia carers do not have access to blue badges in order to help their charges. May we have a debate on this to ensure that carers can park much more easily?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of this issue. I am sure that he would want to join me in saluting the work of the Alzheimer’s Society, in particular, and the creation of a network of more than 1 million dementia friends throughout the United Kingdom. The blue badge scheme already allows carers to use a blue badge when accompanying the badge holder, so the carer in those circumstances does not need a badge in his or her own right. It is then up to local authorities to decide whether to have an additional local permit parking scheme for carers on their own. Given the very different constraints on car park capacity and patterns of travel between one local authority and another, it is right that those decisions should be taken locally.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Now that the Norman Shaw South lights are still on today, I want to join me a couple of times this morning, so it must have been a very good party last night. Perhaps that is why the Prime Minister did discuss Yemen, among many other issues, with the Gulf leaders during her visit this week. The issue of Yemen must have been discussed. Will the Leader of the House arrange for an early statement by the Prime Minister on her discussions with the Heads of Government on the issue of Yemen, where 80% of the population are still in desperate need of humanitarian care and assistance? We hear about Syria and Iraq a great deal in this House, but not enough about Yemen.

Mr Lidington: I am happy to add my congratulations to those expressed by the right hon. Gentleman, both to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and to you and Mrs Bercow, Mr Speaker, on your 14th wedding anniversary, which was yesterday? I noticed that you yawned a couple of times this morning, so it must have been a very good party last night. Perhaps that is why the Norman Shaw South lights are still on today.

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Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is always assiduous in speaking up for the interests of his constituents in Stafford, but it is local authorities that are responsible for commissioning effective drug and alcohol prevention and treatment services, and those decisions are based on the authorities’ understanding of local needs. Health questions on Tuesday 20 December may give my hon. Friend the opportunity to raise his concerns directly with the Secretary of State.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Staffordshire (Jim Shannon) on his award? He is a fellow Leicester City supporter and we need some good news this week after last night. May I also warmly congratulate you and Mrs Bercow, Mr Speaker, on your 14th wedding anniversary, which was yesterday? I noticed that you yawned a couple of times this morning, so it must have been a very good party last night. Perhaps that is why the Norman Shaw South lights are still on today.

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Mr Lidington: I am happy to add my congratulations to those expressed by the right hon. Gentleman, both to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and to you and Mrs Bercow, Mr Speaker.

Anybody who saw Fergal Keane’s BBC report earlier this week about the situation in Yemen will have been both shocked and moved by the plight of so many families who are suffering grievously in the way described by the right hon. Gentleman. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister did discuss Yemen, among many other issues, with the Gulf leaders during her visit this week. The Government are, of course, committing significant sums—£100 million has so far been committed for this year—to humanitarian relief in Yemen. We are also part funding, through an additional £1 million, the office of the United Nations special envoy for Yemen,
because ultimately it is only through an effective political process that we will be able to bring about a resolution to this appalling conflict.

Mr Speaker: I feel very confident that, by one means or another, we will hear about Yemen in the Chamber next week.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I was delighted to hear that there is to be a debate in this place about broadband, but discussions on broadband invariably tend to focus on rural areas. I have nothing against rural areas, but the reality is that there are pockets of urban areas, including my constituency of Cheltenham, that are affected. There are specific factors that affect urban areas. May we please have a debate on the roll-out of superfast broadband in urban areas?

Mr Lidington: I completely understand my hon. Friend’s point. The problem that he describes in Cheltenham is also experienced in not spots in other towns and cities, and I know how frustrating it is, both for householders and for businesses whose broadband access is limited because of it. The Chancellor announced in the autumn statement some additional funds that are available to develop high-speed broadband further. I hope that that may provide opportunities for Cheltenham, as well as for other places.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheik (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Post offices play a crucial role in many communities, particularly in rural villages such as Blackford in my constituency. May we have a debate about the importance of maintaining small shops and post offices, particularly in rural communities, so that the Post Office and others can see the important economic and social impacts of closures?

Mr Lidington: I cannot promise the hon. Lady a debate, although there are questions to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on Tuesday 13 December—next week—and it seems to me that the subject falls within that Department’s responsibilities. This Government and their predecessor, the coalition, put provision in place for communities to take over and operate the last retailer or pub in their area, and I know of examples in my own county where local communities have stepped in successfully.

Ultimately, in an age when more and more of us are doing our shopping and accessing services online, there is an inescapable relationship between customer demand for the services provided by small shops and the viability of those shops as businesses. The message to our constituents has, in part, to be: “You need to use those services, or you risk losing them.”

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Following a remarkable and brave interview on this morning’s edition of “Woman’s Hour”, which I recommend that hon. Members listen to online, may we have a statement about the delayed-action but deadly threat posed to pupils and teachers by the continuing presence of asbestos in schools?

Mr Lidington: I did not hear the interview on “Woman’s Hour” this morning, but I will highlight my right hon. Friend’s interest to the relevant Minister at the Department for Education and ask for a letter to be sent to him.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is welcome news that Tata Steel and the unions have come to an agreement to keep Port Talbot open, and that the Labour Government in Wales are providing support for training. Does the Leader of the House agree that we ought to have a debate about ensuring that that survival goes forward for our steel industry, and in particular that the workers, in agreeing this deal, do not lose out on their pensions?

Mr Lidington: There are some legal requirements that govern pension schemes, which give a measure of protection, and accrued rights under the old pension scheme—I understand that it is proposed to close the scheme—remain preserved. I share the hon. Gentleman’s welcome for the agreement that was reached yesterday and pay tribute to those in all political parties in Wales who have fought so hard for such an agreement to be struck. It is good to see that a way appears to have been found to enable steel production to continue at Port Talbot. I will ask Ministers to address the particular point he raises, but we have Business questions next Tuesday and he may want to try his luck at raising this question again then.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is almost the first anniversary of the Boxing day floods that devastated my constituency and large parts of west Yorkshire. Before the Christmas recess, will the Leader of the House arrange a statement from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to explain what has been done over the past year to prevent any further such flooding in my constituency and those other communities in west Yorkshire, and to explain what arrangements are in place to ensure a rapid response from authorities—including local authorities—if such terrible floods happen again on bank holidays over the Christmas period?

Mr Lidington: Each area now has a designated local authority—either the county or the unitary authority—that has a lead responsibility for co-ordinating flood management and response to flooding. The Government have also ensured in their response to more recent floods in the north-west and south-west of England that Bellwin scheme money is released at a much earlier stage than has sometimes been the case.

Spending on flood management continues, and we recently published a flood resilience strategy that sets out a plan for the longer-term future. I will make sure that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is aware of my hon. Friend’s particular concerns about his own area, about which she may wish to reply in more detail to him.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Liverpool City Council is conducting an online consultation on how to find £90 million more of cuts. That is in addition to the £330 million it has already found since 2010, meaning that it will have lost 70% of its Government support by 2020. May we have a debate in Government time on the disproportionate impact of these cuts on authorities such as Liverpool City Council? In all fairness, will the Leader of the House also come forward and say how the Government can help to alleviate the problem that it has caused?
Mr Lidington: It is undoubtedly true that local authorities—whether in northern or southern England, whether Conservative or Labour councils—are having to take some very tough financial decisions about their relative priorities, just as Departments are having to take some very difficult decisions centrally. These are not decisions that any of us—Ministers or local authority leaders—relish having to take, but they arise from the fact that we inherited an economic wasteland in 2010, with a deficit worse than that accumulated by any Government in our history and one that needed to be paid down as a matter of urgency. It is no good Opposition Members both saying that the Government are moving too slowly to cut the deficit and at the same time resisting each and every measure taken to make the reduction of the deficit possible.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): The PISA—programme for international student assessment—results on educational standards were released earlier this week. Sadly, for the 12th year in a row, Wales lags behind the rest of the UK. That caused the head of Ofsted to say that the result was bringing the UK average down, and the Welsh Liberal Democrat Education Minister to say that we “can do better”. May we have a debate on how the Westminster Government can help the devolved nations to do better and to bring up the UK average?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right to point to the fact that Wales, sadly, performed less well than England. It is also true that the PISA results revealed a sharp decline in standards in Scottish schools during the past 10 years. The message from Sir Michael Wilshaw, as head of Ofsted, is that the quality of leadership at school and local authority level and the energy given in supporting those leaders by elected politicians, business leaders and others is critical to driving up the standards of education. If we are serious about tackling this country’s long-term economic challenges, including our lack of productivity and the challenge posed to so many forms of employment by digital technology, we need to do everything we can to drive up standards in schools and colleges so that young people are able to prosper in such a rapidly changing economic environment.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): Now that the Leader of the House has been identified as our next Prime Minister but one, will he use his new-found authority to insist on a debate on the negotiating strategy for Brexit? While we do not know the destination, subject debates on Brexit are completely irrelevant. Invoking article 50 and going into a time-limited negotiation without at least a broad outline of outcomes means that Monsieur Barnier will make la viande hachée—mincemeat—of us. May we have a debate to avoid his meat being minced?

Mr Lidington: I have looked at the Order Papers for the period since we came back after the summer recess in September, and I think it is right to say that we have had at least one debate on an aspect of EU exit in every week, or every week but one. We had a full day’s debate yesterday, in which exactly these issues were aired. The Prime Minister has made it clear that the Government will publish more detail about our negotiating objectives next year before we trigger article 50 of the treaties. What we should not and will not do is give the sort of detailed exposition that I fear the right hon. Gentleman is seeking. None of the other 27 EU Governments are doing anything like that, and nor should we. You do not reveal your negotiating hand when you are about to start negotiations.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The United Nations estimates that since 9 October 240,000 people have been displaced from Myanmar. The humanitarian disaster unfolding suggests that thousands are having to become refugees in Bangladesh and other parts of south-east Asia. Islamic Relief is doing its best to cope with that humanitarian disaster, but may we have a statement from the Department for International Development—or whichever Department is deemed appropriate—on what the Government will do to help those who are refugees in their own country?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend knows that there is a long and very sad history of communal tension in Myanmar, and in particular a history of discrimination against and persecution of the Rohingya people. When talking to their Burmese opposite numbers, British Ministers, our embassy in the capital and Foreign Office officials constantly raise the need to observe human rights standards and ensure the wellbeing of all communities in Myanmar. We will continue to do that, as well as directing some of our DFID spending programme towards humanitarian relief in that country.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Periods are an annoyance for every menstruating woman but for homeless women they are far more than that. Sanitary products are simply unaffordable for thousands living on the streets, an issue raised by the campaign the Homeless Period. Will the Leader of the House commit to a debate to discuss ways to relieve the degradation and embarrassment faced by thousands every single day?

Mr Lidington: I cannot offer an immediate debate, but the hon. Lady makes a perfectly reasonable case for the subject to be looked at further and I will make sure that the relevant Minister does so.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The news coming out of Port Talbot yesterday is hugely welcome in Corby after months of uncertainty in the steel industry. In the light of that news I pay tribute to Ministers, colleagues across parties and the unions for the constructive work that has taken place to get to this point. I echo the calls of the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). May we have a statement next week to discuss the next steps as we move forward towards reaching a final agreement?

Mr Lidington: Throughout his time here since 2015, my hon. Friend has been a formidable spokesman for his constituency and for the interests of the United Kingdom steel industry more generally. I join him in his tribute to all those who made the deal possible. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be here next Tuesday and I am sure that there will be questions to him on this subject.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that the Leader of the House will be aware that earlier this week Women’s Aid and nia launched the first report
from the femicide census, which details the cases of nearly 1,000 women in England and Wales who have been killed by men since 2009. I am aware of the debate later this afternoon, but in response to that report may we have a statement from the Government on what they will be doing to stop any more women being killed at the hands of men through domestic violence?

Mr Liddington: The report is important, as the hon. Gentleman says, and Ministers will want to study and reflect on it before announcing any possible policy initiatives. It is good that more people now are willing to come forward and report instances of domestic abuse before they get to the really critical stage he described where someone’s life is under threat. It is also true that the police are now much readier to investigate and take action in respect of such cases than might have been the case some years ago. These are always difficult judgments for the police officers and social workers who are dealing with individual families to take, but the key has to be for people who are victims to feel confident that if they come forward the allegations they make will be taken very seriously and investigated properly, and that, where there is evidence, prosecutions will follow.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): A few years ago, it emerged that if the then Prime Minister Tony Blair was indisposed or worse, John Prescott would take over as Prime Minister—the nation slept more soundly because of that. It then emerged that William Hague would take over if the coalition Prime Minister was indisposed or worse. It then emerged that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) would take over from David Cameron. It emerged yesterday, with a superb performance by the Leader of the House, that it is clearly he who would take over as Prime Minister if our Prime Minister was indisposed or worse. May we have a short statement to put that on the record, so we know where everyone stands?

Mr Liddington: I sometimes think that my hon. Friend spends his spare hours compiling an actuarial table of senior members of the Government. What I can say to him is that whatever circumstances may arise the Queen’s Government will carry on.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Over the past few years, job-finding services, such as cards displaying real jobs and telephones to call about those jobs, have been stripped from jobcentres. With the unexpected news yesterday that the number of Glasgow jobcentres will be cut by 50%, including the jobcentre in Anniesland in my constituency, will the Leader of the House make a statement on the services my constituents should expect in the new planned supercentres?

Mr Liddington: These are obviously matters that will primarily be for the management of Jobcentre Plus, but there will be the full range of Jobcentre Plus services at the larger centres. As I said in response to the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), I hope the hon. Lady and her colleagues will acknowledge that one reason we need to provide a concentration of services, to help and provide support to those who genuinely—owing to disability, long-term unemployment or whatever other reason—find it hard to get back into work, is that the overall number of people out of work, in Glasgow and elsewhere in Scotland, has come down very significantly. I do wish that Scottish National party Members would sometimes balance their challenges to the Government with a recognition of the fact that there are now more people in work than ever before.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I was rather disappointed with the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) in relation to Liverpool City Council’s spending difficulties. Bristol has just imposed a spending freeze, as it bids to find cuts of £92 million over the next five years. The Mayor is, rightly, being as transparent and open as possible, with a public consultation on what this will mean. Will the Government not emulate that openness by having a debate in Government time on the financial difficulties facing our core cities?

Mr Liddington: I am sure there will be plenty of opportunities in various proceedings of the House for these issues to be raised, whether in generic terms or in relation to local authorities. This challenge is not confined to Bristol or any other city, or any other local authority, urban or rural. Nor are central Government Departments in any way exempt. We have to live within our means. We have to pay down the remaining third of the deficit we inherited in 2010; otherwise we will not be able to pay our way in the world.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I join my hon. Friends in asking for a debate in Government time or a statement on jobcentre closures in Glasgow, and in particular on the effects this measure will have on social security claimants. Will the Leader of the House confirm that an equality impact assessment will be published, so that all hon. Members can provide their response to these closures and the effects they will have on claimants?

Mr Liddington: The DWP will comply with all its statutory obligations in respect of these changes. It has held initial consultations and briefings with the trade unions, and they will now consult their members about its proposals, but again I just say to the hon. Gentleman that the reason for the consolidation is not just that Glasgow has more small individual jobcentres than other cities in Scotland, but that unemployment in Scotland has come down. The level of employment in Scotland has gone up by 166,000 since 2010, while the youth claimant count has gone down by a very welcome 18,200.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Can we have a debate on environmental protection after we leave the EU, because I am deeply concerned that in the rush towards a red, white and blue Brexit, we will simply get rid of the green?

Mr Liddington: The Government remain very committed to our climate change objectives and to improving the UK’s environmental performance overall. That is why my right hon. Friend, the now Home Secretary, played a leading role last year, along with the then French Foreign Minister, in agreeing the Paris deal, the first-ever binding global agreement on carbon reduction and climate change. The Government are delivering through their investment in renewable technologies, along with
the additional measures in the autumn statement on electric and other ultra-low emission vehicles, to ensure that we maintain those green policies that will give us economic and commercial opportunities as well as an improved environment.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House agree that the boundary review should be carried out using the most up-to-date information, and will he therefore set out what is delaying the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill from going into Committee?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass), the Bill’s promoter, did not produce a text for the Bill until three days, I think, before it was set down for Second Reading, and there was no memorandum or other estimate of the costs associated with it. The Government, therefore, in dealing with the request for a money resolution, are doing their own analysis of the costs of implementing the Bill. I say to the hon. Gentleman, however, that for any boundary review there has to be a cut-off point after which the commission can get on with its job. If we were to follow the Labour party’s advice and simply abort the current overdue boundary review, we would go into the 2020 election with constituencies that differed vastly in the size of their electorate and on the basis of population figures derived from a consensus that by then would be 20 years old.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): A constituent has brought to my attention an unfortunate situation—perhaps an unintended consequence of current legislation—regarding a protracted period of unemployment. Being desperate for work, he found employment on a short-term contract abroad, only to return home to discover that he was ineligible for jobseeker’s allowance. Can we have a statement or debate in Government time on the impact of the Jobseeker’s Allowance (Habitual Residence) Amendment Regulations 2013, particularly the three-month rule for UK nationals returning after short-term contracts abroad?

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Gentleman would like to give me details of the constituency case, I will ask the relevant DWP Minister to look into it in more detail.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Our state-run nursery schools employ fully qualified teachers and headteachers, and they do a brilliant job, often in deprived areas—I have a number in my constituency, including the Fields children’s centre, which I visited a few weeks ago—but proposed Government funding changes are putting their very future at risk. Can we have a statement from the Education Secretary and a debate before these vital services are done irreversible damage?

Mr Lidington: The Government are not cutting nursery education but expanding the provision of nursery and other early years education. However, there are Education questions on Monday 19 December, at which the hon. Gentleman can raise these points with Ministers.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): May we have a debate on pancreatic cancer? We recently had pancreatic cancer awareness month. This year, I sadly lost my own uncle to the disease, and my family, like many others across the United Kingdom, are only too aware of how intractable it is and that further funding for research and developments in treatment are badly needed.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. One of the real challenges with pancreatic cancer is that the symptoms are often not recognised until it is too late for any kind of effective treatment to be given to the patient. She will have noted that in my statement I announced time for the Backbench Business Committee that is as yet unassigned, so she might want to take this issue up with the Committee Chair.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): May we have a statement or a debate in Government time on consultation periods? The Government have announced two important consultations, and both last over the Christmas period. Consultation on reforming the soft tissue claims process opened on 17 November and closes on 6 January, which is a day over seven weeks, while consultation on reforming the employment tribunal system opened on 5 December and closes on 21 January, which is one day less than seven weeks. Surely Christmas knocks out about two weeks of that, so we are down to five weeks. The last Labour Government guidance stated that there should be a minimum of 12 weeks and that if it is over Christmas, it should be longer, but this Government amended that to a “proportionate amount of time”. Surely five weeks is very little time to respond to these crucial consultations, and both should be extended to over 12 weeks. The Leader of the House needs to understand that the results of consultation are for life, not just for Christmas.

Mr Lidington: There is a balance to be struck in any consultation period between allowing sufficient time for representations and ensuring that the timetable allows decisions to be taken and policy to be brought forward. The hon. Lady’s suggestion that we should simply write off two weeks over Christmas and the new year seems to me to be somewhat extraordinary. The two timetables that she described allow in each case for several weeks well apart from the Christmas and new year period. At a time when postal services are perhaps not running normally, all these consultations invite responses online, so it is not at all difficult for people to make representations without having to rely on the post.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The Government’s announcement on jobcentres yesterday will take Glasgow’s jobcentres down from 16 to eight, and there will be consultation only on two of those closures across the city. Members of Parliament had to read about this in the press, and it took seven hours after that story breaking before a Minister bothered to contact me. Given that, does the Leader of the House agree that we need a statement? If he is so confident about accessibility as between closing jobcentres and remaining jobcentres, will be tell me how far it is from Castlemilk to Newlands, and how long the journey would take him on a bus?
Mr Lidington: What my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is proposing is to bring the distribution of jobcentres in Glasgow in line with the pattern that already applies in other Scottish cities. I note that there is no outcry from Scottish National party Members about opening additional jobcentres in other cities. It seems to me that what the Department is proposing is entirely reasonable. Its objective is to provide an enhanced service to those people who need help from jobcentres.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Eitham (Clive Efford) set out and as we know from the Transport Secretary’s own words, the decision not to pass suburban rail services to the Mayor of London was based on party politics and not on evidence. Can the Leader of the House commit the Government to a genuine and impartial assessment of the case for devolution based on the needs of London and the south-east, not on one man’s prejudices?

Mr Lidington: As the Secretary of State for Transport said on Monday, he has invited the Mayor of London and TfL to engage in detailed discussions about how to work much more closely together in the management of commuter routes. I repeat again that those routes do not serve just London constituencies and communities; they are absolutely critical to the travel-to-work arrangements of tens of thousands of people living outside the Greater London area, whom they also serve.

It is only right that those people, too, should have some democratic route through which to challenge and to hold to account the people responsible for taking decisions about their railway.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): During the summer, I conducted a consultation in my constituency about VAT reductions for tourism businesses. It was made clear to me that we could create more jobs and put more money into the local economy and, indeed, the national Exchequer if we targeted those businesses, but this week I received a letter from the Treasury whose contents could be summarised as “no”. May we have a debate on the issue so that we can draw attention to the benefits of pursuing such a policy, which would enable local economies like mine to grow?

Mr Lidington: I am delighted if the hon. Gentleman has become a convert to the cause of lower taxation, although I think he may have a job of work to do to persuade others in his party. However, there is also the necessity for any Government to raise revenue in order to pay for services, which he and his colleagues keep arguing to me should receive additional funding, not less. The Government are committed to trying to reduce taxation wherever and whenever they are able to do so, but we must live within our means as a country, and that means raising the revenue to pay for public services and pay down the deficit, which is still too high.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): A constituent of mine, Mr Singleton, approached me recently because he had been told by his energy supplier, E.ON, that his warm home discount payment would not reach him until May. Happily we have now been assured that the payment will be received earlier than that, but E.ON has said that other customers may still not receive their payments before 31 May 2017. At a time when fuel poverty is such a problem, it is totally unacceptable for those payments to be delayed for so long. May we have an urgent debate on the issue?

Mr Lidington: I hope that the management of E.ON have heard the criticisms that the hon. Gentleman has made on behalf of his constituent, and will do whatever they can to speed up those payments. One reason for welcoming the ability of customers to switch between energy suppliers is that it enables them to move their energy accounts to suppliers which they believe will give them a better and speedier service, but, as I have said, I hope that the company will take note of the case that he has described, which I suspect may apply to a great many other people as well.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Mr Speaker,

“you’ve got the Saudis, Iran, everybody, moving in and puppeteering and playing proxy wars, and it’s a tragedy to watch it.”

Those were not my words but those of our Foreign Secretary, in footage released by The Guardian yesterday evening. May we have a debate in Government time on the role that we are playing in that tragedy, not as innocent bystanders but as the kingdom’s largest arms trading partner?

Mr Lidington: Let me say to the hon. Lady that people in this country are safer from terrorism because of the close co-operation that we have with Saudi Arabia and the other states of the Gulf Co-operation Council. They are critical allies in that work, and it is right that we should continue the strong alliance that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was seeking to cement when she visited the GCC summit this week.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, of which I am the chair—I should declare that interest—and Ahmadiyya Muslim Community UK are concerned about the potential use of anti-terror laws by the Pakistani Government, given that in January, under those laws, 81-year-old Abdul Shakoor was sentenced to eight years in prison for possessing copies of the Holy Koran. The police have gatecrashed a publications office and raided the Ziaul Islam Press, seizing printing plates of the Tehrik-e-Jadid magazine. All that reflects the Pakistan authorities’ relentless targeting of the Ahmadiyya community simply on the grounds of their faith. May I ask the Leader of the House for a debate on the issue?

Mr Lidington: Pakistan, like many other countries, faces a genuine challenge from ruthless organised terrorist groups. There is always a tricky balance to be sought between having and exercising powers that will be effective against a real threat from terrorists and not trampling on basic civil rights. That balance, and complaints about abuse of human rights in Pakistan through the application of anti-terrorism laws, are issues that Ministers and Government officials raise constantly in their conversations with Pakistani counterparts.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): We all agree that the National Audit Office does a great job of scrutiny, but last year 60% of its 108 investigations
and reviews excluded Scotland. Given the earlier non-
answers we got from the Deputy Leader of the House,
can the Leader of the House give me a statement with a
detailed explanation of why no Barnett consequentials
arise from the contribution of over £300 million towards
the NAO’s work? We will request a review of that
allocation.

Mr Lidington: The NAO is not directed by the
Government; it is an independent body that sets its own
priorities. I will refer the hon. Gentleman’s question to
the Comptroller and Auditor General and ask him to
write to the hon. Gentleman with the explanation he is
seeking.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): On a point
of order, Mr Speaker. My point of order is not dissimilar
to the previous one. Mine relates to the response given
by the Department for Transport to the urgent question
tabled on Monday by the hon. Member for Brighton,
Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) in respect of Southern rail.
My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West
Norwood (Helen Hayes), the right hon. Member for
Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who is present,
and I asked the Minister in question whether the
Government’s intention was still to devolve rail commuter
services to Transport for London. We were not given
any answer. However, as my hon. Friend the Member
for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) has just said, clearly
the Secretary of State for Transport has already made
up his mind about that on the basis of party political
reasons, and, secondly, having provided no answer, we
then found it in the Evening Standard the day after.

I know you, Mr Speaker, place a premium on Ministers
coming here and giving information to this House when
questions are asked, not providing it in the newspapers
afterwards. Frankly, I am utterly exasperated at this,
because my constituents will take grave exception to Ministers playing party politics with the misery they are facing day in, day out on this line. I would be very grateful for your guidance, Mr Speaker, on how we can ensure Ministers give the right information to this House and do not fail to give us the information we require.

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point of order, and of course I remember well the exchanges to which he refers as they took place only three days ago. My off-the-cuff response is twofold. First, the absence of comprehensive answers to questions posed, under Governments of a variety of complexions, is not without precedent. Secondly, it is difficult to know—and it is not for the Speaker to judge—at what point a Government have decided on a policy and decided to communicate it. However, it does seem a tad strange if something is not communicated in the House in response to a specific question but is then communicated to the media a very short time afterwards. As I have said, it is not for me to judge in each case, but I really do think that if Ministers wish to avert the potentially embarrassing scenario of another urgent question being tabled on the same matter, with the possibility of a Minister having to answer a second time, it would be wise for them to factor that consideration into their calculations of how to conduct themselves.

**Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. You have ruled on a number of occasions that, as a courtesy to the House, Members should inform one another when they are visiting another Member’s constituency on official business. I discovered last week that the Minister for Security, the hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), had visited my constituency in his ministerial capacity. I discovered this when reading an article that was later published in my local newspaper. I subsequently raised the lack of notification with his office, which told me that it did not regard this obligation as applying to Ministers. This is particularly disappointing, given that I have often raised the serious issues that were the subject of his visit, and I would have welcomed the opportunity to discuss them with him prior to and during his visit. I am sure that I do not need to refer you to paragraph 10.9 of the ministerial code, Mr Speaker, but I ask you to clarify that this convention does indeed apply to Ministers and advise me of what recourse a Member has when the ministerial code is broken. What advice could you offer to the Minister of State and his office on this matter? Is there any further training or guidance that could be given to Ministers regarding their obligations to this House?

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, and I can offer her some comfort in the matter. The short answer is that the obligation most certainly does apply to Ministers, and I am frankly staggered to hear it suggested—

**The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis):** Shocking!

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman says he finds it shocking that anyone would suppose otherwise. I thought that this was very well known in the House.

Let me give the hon. Lady a substantive reply. It is a long-standing convention that Members should notify each other before visiting others’ constituencies in a public capacity. Obviously, if one Member is going to another’s constituency for a private dinner party, the obligation does not apply, but we are talking about the conduct of public business. The requirement for Ministers is enshrined in the ministerial code, and Ministers really ought to be familiar with and ready to adhere to it. I agree that it is a most unsatisfactory situation when notice is not given, and I urge Members on both sides, and Ministers in particular, to observe that traditional courtesy. The point has been made, and I know that the Leader of the House, who is extremely assiduous and highly respected in this place for his courtesy—I can say that with some personal knowledge as he has been my constituency neighbour for the best part of two decades—takes these matters very seriously and that he will do all he can to ensure that other Ministers behave with the courtesy that he customarily exhibits.

**Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP):** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Two weeks ago, the Leader of the House was reminded from across the Chamber, not least by yourself, that the overwhelming custom, practice and precedent is that when Bills pass Second Reading, as the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill did, they should be duly certified and go to Committee without undue delay. Today, the Leader of the House expanded on his excuses for that not happening, including...
reasons that he did not give two weeks ago. Every single one of us knows that this is nothing more than political chicanery. Yesterday, the Leader of the House reached the heights of deputising for the Prime Minister. Today, he is reaching the depths and not fulfilling the proper responsibilities of a Leader of the House. How can we persuade him to mend his ways?

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the House is entitled to respond if he wishes. If he does not wish to do so, it is fair to say that it is very much the norm that the Government should come forward with the appropriate resolution. It is not strictly a matter for the Chair if that does not happen, but knowing the right hon. Gentleman as I do and how familiar he is with that long-standing requirement, and knowing his tendency, quite prudently, only to ask a question when he already knows the answer, any member of the Government is taking some risk in persisting in failing to do what is expected. I sense that the right hon. Gentleman will, to put it bluntly, keep basking on about the matter until he gets what he wants.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have two brief points. First, I think the Leader of the House perhaps inadvertently misled the House in response to questions from my hon. Friends about jobcentre closures in Glasgow. He stated that the plans would be subject to full consultation, but they will not. The Government plan to consult on only two of eight closures across the city, and I cannot stress enough to the House how devastating that news is.

Secondly, Mr Speaker, will you advise me and hon. Friends who represent Glasgow constituencies what recourse is open to us to put right the gross discourtesy that was shown to us yesterday by the Department for Work and Pensions? We had to read about the closures in the press, and it took Ministers more than seven hours to get in touch with us. We consider that to be grossly disrespectful, so can you advise on whether any recourse to raise that with Ministers? Alternatively, have you had any indication of whether a Department for Work and Pensions Minister is coming to the House today to discuss this matter?

Mr Speaker: I must confess that I suffer from some ignorance on that matter. It is an enormously important point, but not one on which I have any knowledge. The hon. Gentleman asks whether there is any recourse for him, and the answer is yes: he should table a written question, narrowly focused on that matter, to try to extract a substantive answer. He is quite a terrier and I am sure that this is not beyond him.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudon) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is about answers I have received from the Secretary of State for Scotland, and I had hoped to raise the matter yesterday. I asked an oral question in the Chamber advising him that I had written to the Chancellor suggesting that LIBOR money be used for opencast coal restoration, asking him whether he had had similar discussions with the Chancellor and challenging him on whether he had done anything about a previous pledge in the 2015 Green Book. The answer I got was:

“The hon. Gentleman knows that I—and, indeed, the UK Government—have done a great deal to work with East Ayrshire Council to ensure that opencast restoration could proceed in that area.”—[Official Report, 23 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 879-880.]

He put great emphasis in that exchange on “a great deal”.

Not because I am cynical but because I wanted to give credit where credit is due, I submitted three written questions asking how much money the UK Government have spent on opencast restoration, what actions they had taken and how many meetings the Secretary of State had had with the Chancellor. I got a single grouped answer which did not give any figures or cost information at all. The Secretary of State said that he had had a number of formal and informal meetings with Government colleagues. He went on to say:

“BEIS officials have participated in the Scottish Government’s Coal Restoration Working Group which agreed a way forward”. The reply included a link to a record of a meeting, but funnily enough no UK Government official had been at that meeting. He also said that the Coal Authority provides advice.

I therefore had to submit a follow-up written question. I apologise for the detail here, but I will try to be brief. That question tried to pin down some answers about what funding had been provided and what future funding would be provided—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are indescribably grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising these important matters. No one could accuse him of excluding from his attempted point of order any point that he thinks might be, in any way, at any time or anywhere, judged to be material. There is a comprehensiveness about his approach that is as impressive as it is infuriating. I do not think I have ever said this before: there is a sense in which I share his pain, but there are very few new precedents in this place.
He says with open-eyed astonishment that he put down several questions which were treated as a sort of job lot by the Minister, but I very much doubt his experience is any worse than mine. Many, many years ago, long before I had the privilege of occupying the Chair, I tabled 60 questions to the then Minister for Europe, who had the extreme temerity to provide me with a dismissive one-word reply to all 60. I simply returned to the drawing board and came up with a further series of questions, on the basis that I could thereby occupy the Minister's attention in such a way that he would be doing less damage responding to me than he might be doing in other ways.

What I say to the hon. Gentleman is that the content of ministerial answers is the responsibility of the Minister concerned. If a Minister felt, with hindsight, that an answer had been inaccurate, it would be open to him or her to correct the record. I realise that the hon. Gentleman finds the answers he has received unsatisfactory, but I am afraid that that is not a point of order for the Chair. He asks how he can get decent answers out of Ministers. That is a question that has taxed many of us, myself included, over the years, but the best approach is for the hon. Gentleman to use persistence and ingenuity, both of which he has demonstrated he possesses in abundance. Moreover, I suggest to him that he should seek the advice of the Table Office. One thing I learned early in my time in this place is that the staff of the Table Office are there to help. If he is told that his approach is not in order or is not the best approach, he should then proceed to ask the follow-up question, "How can I best go about the matter of inquiry?" The Table Office staff are both public spirited and expert, and they will be able to help him. His visits there will profit him.

### Backbench Business

#### UN International Day: Violence against Women


12.10 pm

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House notes the UN's International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence; further notes that violence against women is a human rights violation and prevents women and girls fulfilling their full potential; recognises that an estimated one in three women experience physical or sexual violence worldwide, but that violence against women and girls is not inevitable, and that prevention is possible and essential; and calls on the Government to work with other governments around the world to adopt comprehensive laws addressing violence against women and gender-based inequality and discrimination, to provide women-centred, specialist services to all survivors, and to fund key education and prevention programmes so that violence against women and girls is ended once and for all.

I thank hon. Members from all parts of the House who have supported this debate today. They include: my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), the hon. Members for Maidstone and the Weald (Mrs Grant), for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). I also thank other Members who are here to contribute to the debate, I particularly wish to recognise the work of the right hon. Member for Basingstoke who is Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee and whose report is also being debated today.

I am proud that, as a Parliament, we are debating this motion, because it is vital that Parliament plays its part on the world stage in combating violence against women in all its forms, at home and abroad. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women describes violence against women and girls as

"any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty".

The 16 days of action, which have seen events and campaigns across the country and the world, end on 10 December, Human Rights Day. This year also marks the 25th anniversary of the 16 days of action.

Tackling violence against women has to be a cross-party issue, and the delivery of strategies has to be based on what works and has to go across Parliaments. In 2009, the Labour Government published the first violence against women and girls strategy, which was described as marking a major shift to joined-up policy. The current Government strategy continues that approach, but the challenge that we face now is ensuring that we have a complete strategy and that we turn that strategy into outcomes.
Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that perhaps one of the best examples of a cross-party approach is the support for the Istanbul convention? Does she hope that the Government will fully adopt that convention?

Seema Malhotra: The right hon. Gentleman leads me directly on to my next point. I was about to congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on the publication of her Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Ratification of Convention) Bill, which will have its Second Reading next week. The UK signed the convention in June 2012, but has not yet ratified it. That issue was the subject of a letter today to the Prime Minister signed by more than 75 Labour Members of Parliament. Let me just take a moment to thank the IcChange campaign for its work on this issue, and to recognise the early-day motion of the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), which was signed by Members from across the House.

In opening this debate, I wish to make three main points: the first is the growing scale of the challenge at home and abroad; the second is our call to the Government to do more on prevention through relationship and sex education and ratifying the Istanbul convention; and the third is the culture shift across society, businesses and public services that is needed to lift the lid on violence against women and girls and to engage all in the role that they can play in eliminating that violence in all its forms.

Let me start with the scale of the challenge. Violence against women and girls is rising at home and abroad. Worldwide, an estimated one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence—that is a staggering statistic. The World Health Organisation highlights the fact that, in addition to being a human rights issue, violence against women is a major public health issue. Women who have experienced violence are more likely to have babies with low birth weights and to experience depression. Each year in the UK, up to 3 million women experience violence. On average, one woman in Britain dies at the hands of a man every three days. We also know that around one in 10 domestic violence incidents involves men as victims. That number is significant, but the overall figures show the scale and gendered nature of domestic and sexual violence. The cost to our economy is estimated to be around £25 billion. This scourge is present in every community across our nation. Domestic and sexual violence knows no boundaries—of age, geography, ethnicity or social background.

I want to share a few, relatively recent, examples from my constituency. I was approached by a lady who had suffered domestic violence for many years. Eventually, she found the courage to leave her husband, but was unable to care for her children who were then taken away. The abuse continued and she now lives in terror of her ex-husband and his family. She feels unsupported by the police, and scrims and saves to afford new door locks and security. Her future feels uncertain, and she lives a nightmare every day.

Another told me how, six years after leaving her husband who had an alcohol addiction, he recently reappeared and threatened her elderly parents. She is at a loss as to how to protect them as well as herself. The impact of domestic abuse is borne not just by female victims, but by children. SafeLives estimates that 130,000 children live in homes in which a parent faces serious harm or death at the hands of their partner or ex-partner. Those children can go on to replicate the behaviour that they have seen. One mother told me of her experience. She said that her teenage son was starting to behave in the way that he had seen his father behave. He was lucky enough to respond to her challenging him, but she knows that the story is not over for him, and is now seeking support for him as the trauma that he experienced plays out in his life as he reaches adulthood.

The challenges that we now face in the provision of child and adult mental health services are having an impact on outcomes. One mother told me that she had to wait a year for support for her six-year-old son who had witnessed her abuse. That just cannot be right.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that not enough resources are being invested in shelters and refuges for women? Moreover, another by-product of domestic violence is that it affects not only a child’s character but a child’s education. If I were a kid at school, I would be more worried about what was happening to my mother than about my lessons.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend has supported refuges and other services that help his constituents. I will, if I may, refer here to the work of Refugee and Women’s Aid in challenging the cuts to refuges and the support for women and their families. It is horrifying that, in recent years, we have seen an increase in the number of women being turned away from support because of the lack of provision.

My hon. Friend mentioned schools and educational attainment. I would extend that to the role that schools are playing in picking up the pieces. One school told me that it estimated that five children in each class were experiencing or witnessing domestic abuse in some form at home. I was told the very sad story of how a school was working with a mother who kept an emergency escape bag in a cupboard at the school for when she felt she had to flee her home.

Such cases are far from unique. Women’s Aid highlights some staggering statistics. The crime survey of England and Wales found that 27.1% of women had experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16. The rate of domestic violence crime against women has doubled each year since 2009, and there were over 100,000 prosecutions for domestic abuse in 2015-16, the highest number ever recorded.

It is a year since the new offence of coercive control came into force. Domestic abuse goes beyond physical violence. Using the law effectively will require greater understanding. I would be grateful if, in her closing remarks, the Minister outlined the steps that the Government are taking to improve training for statutory agencies so that some of the new offences can be put to greater use.

Online abuse is a growing problem. The scale and nature of domestic and other abuse are changing. Online abuse is combining with offline abuse. A survey by Women’s Aid shows that over 45% of survivors of domestic violence had also experienced online abuse. The existing legal frameworks should be examined to ensure that the law is up to date in all areas to provide protection against online abuse as well as offline abuse.
Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that Facebook, Twitter and other social media outlets need to take responsibility for some of the abuse, and that they do not regulate enough? More regulation through law or through their own work would be a positive step to support women and girls who are subject to abuse, as well as other groups that are abused via the social media network.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Later I shall mention the work of the Reclaim the Internet campaign chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) highlights the need for a code of practice for technology companies and social media providers to ensure that survivors of domestic abuse and other forms of violence are protected online, and that other vulnerable users are not subject to abuse that goes unchallenged or unaddressed.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that codes of conduct already exist? There are rules of the road that the social media platforms ostensibly trumpet as monitoring their conduct online, but do they not enforce them to the extent that they should?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. There are good and emerging codes of practice, but they do not go far enough and they certainly are not enforced sufficiently. Further work could be done—for example, the Government could investigate the regulation or closing down of websites that promote or profit from image-based sexual abuse, an approach advocated by Women's Aid. We could also look at the extent to which criminal and civil sanctions are used in cases of domestic abuse, such as domestic violence protection orders and non-molestation orders, which can be applied to routinely restrain a perpetrator from making digital contact with a survivor. I hope to hear a more substantive response from the Minister on that.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the problem is that the rules of the road that the social media platforms ostensibly trumpet as monitoring their conduct online are not enforced to the extent that they should.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is right. Having worked in the creative industries on some of the issues surrounding the prevention and addressing of abuse online, I experienced the complexity of reaching agreement. The more we work together with other Governments and lead on that, the more that will help us to move forward on the complex issue of policy and regulation. My hon. Friend points out the potential risks to such cross-government working that could come from Brexit, and I hope the Minister will deal with that in her remarks and give the House confidence that our ratification and implementation of the Istanbul convention will not be affected by impending Brexit.

I want to mention the Femicide Census. It is a horror that we record the details of women killed by men. The initiative was launched in partnership with Women's Aid, based on the information collected by Karen Ingala Smith on her blog “Counting Dead Women”, where she began collating details of women killed by men. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley has spoken powerfully about this in the House on previous occasions. This week a new report was released which covers seven years and collates information on women in England and Wales killed by male violence. The report makes a number of recommendations to the Government. I am confident that we will hear from Ministers about their response.

I recognise the work done by local authorities across the country, even as they grapple with cuts. Data for my own local authority from the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime show that in the year to September 2016, there were over 4,400 more notifiable offences than in the year to September 2015. There has been a rise in domestic offences, sexual offences and rape offences. The lead Hounslow councillor on this portfolio is Sue Sampson. In 1976 Sue’s sister Maureen Roberts was shot dead, aged 23, by her estranged husband at her place of work, West Middlesex hospital, which still serves my constituency.

Maureen had become a victim of domestic violence shortly after she got married three years earlier. Straight after her husband shot her, he turned the gun on himself, killing himself. Sue still lives with the shock and horror of what happened, like many others who are victims of these attacks on women. Such killings are increasingly being documented. Victims live with those stories for the rest of their lives. We have come far with the changes in the law, but, as this week’s Femicide Census shows, such violence still happens all too often.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a very powerful speech on this incredibly important subject. She is right to mention local councils. Stafford Borough Council has worked with Staffordshire Women’s Aid to create a new women’s refuge in Stafford. Does the hon. Lady agree that this is a fine example of partnership working, which in this case is under the inspirational leadership of Dickie James?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman has made his point extremely well, and he is absolutely right. Indeed, his local authority, like Hounslow and others, is at the forefront of prevention, early intervention and the provision of support. However, like Hounslow, many authorities will face huge challenges in tackling both the reduction in funding across statutory and non-statutory organisations and, indeed, the integration of services.

As the data show, the scale of the challenge is increasing, and the pattern of violence seems to begin even earlier. The recent inquiry and very powerful report by the Women and Equalities Committee found that almost a third of 16 to 18-year-olds say they have experienced unwanted sexual touching at school. Some 59% of girls and young women aged 13 to 21 said in 2014 that they had faced some sort of sexual harassment at school or college. As the hon. Member for Cheltenham mentioned, we need to reflect on the fact that the nature of violence can change. Last year, the revenge porn helpline received almost 4,000 calls, with children as young as 11 making those calls.
The battle is being fought hard. We are lucky to have the organisations we do, and the individuals working tirelessly in them mean there is cause for hope. I want to acknowledge and thank organisations including Refuge and Women’s Aid, whose Save Our Services campaign I have mentioned and which also has the very effective Child First campaign. Respect deals with the needs of perpetrators. I should also mention Southall Black Sisters, FORWARD and the End Violence Against Women Coalition, as well as female genital mutilation campaigners Hibo Wardere, Nimco Ali, Leyla Hussein and Fahma Mohamed, who, aged 19, was recognised by Bristol University this year with an honorary doctorate for her work in driving forward a very effective campaign.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): A very powerful point is being made. The work of women’s refuges was mentioned, and I want to highlight the fact that the Government are providing £20 million for women’s refuges to help them with their valuable work. I would urge people to applaud that and to take advantage of it. What would the hon. Lady say about that?

Seema Malhotra: I have worked on these issues in Parliament for a number of years, and I am sure the hon. Lady will understand that while I acknowledge that support, I also question whether it goes far enough, whether it will be sustained so that organisations can plan sufficiently and whether it has been funded through cuts in other areas. There are complex issues around funding for refuges, of which the hon. Lady will be well aware. Supporting those services absolutely has to be a priority for any Government so that we can ensure we provide support for women at their most vulnerable moments.

The Everyday Sexism campaign has campaigned hard and shown very effectively how women face threats, harassment and violence in every walk of life. The Reclaim the Internet campaign, which I mentioned, has a really important role to play, because the scale of the technology in our lives, and the way it can be used to the advantage of victims and to support them, but also against them, must be understood and tackled by lawmakers and regulators. I also want to put on record my appreciation for SafeLives, the White Ribbon Campaign, Imkaan and others which remind us that gender-based violence is not inevitable and that prevention is not only possible but essential.

Let me turn to why we hope the Government will do much more and why we need them to do more.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Just before the hon. Lady comes to a very large chunk of her speech, I should point out to her that I fully appreciate that she has taken a lot of interventions and that we are not under tremendous time pressure, but she has taken very much longer than the time normally allocated for the opening speech in a debate such as this. I am not suggesting she should finish immediately, but perhaps she should just have a couple of minutes more.

Seema Malhotra: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will be pleased to hear that I am very close indeed to concluding.

Seema Malhotra: [Debate continues]

As I mentioned, I and other Labour Members wrote to the Prime Minister regarding the Istanbul convention, and an update on the issue from the Minister today would be very welcome.

I welcome the Government’s moves this week on the new measures to support victims of stalking. There was also the announcement of new funding and guidelines. Obviously, there is much work to do with the national statement of expectations to ensure that what has been announced actually makes a difference and addresses the challenges we have heard about from services across the country. We need to ensure that best practice that is highlighted is promoted and extended, and that those providing services through local authorities have some guarantees that they will have resources in the future.

I want to refer to the urgent need for compulsory and age-appropriate relationship and sex education, and I recognise the work my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) has done on this recently. I also want to explain why it is so urgent to focus on healthy and consensual relationships. I met the family of Hollie Gazzard, who founded the Hollie Gazzard Trust in memory of 20-year-old Hollie, who was killed in 2014 by an ex-partner. They highlighted how she did not speak out about the abuse, and nor did she understand the signs of a controlling relationship. They believe very strongly that relationship and sex education in school should have saved their daughter, and that is a message they take out through their organisation. There is an urgent need for this provision, and I fail to understand how, after six years, the Government have failed to implement what all the evidence shows is absolutely necessary. Where there is relationship and sex education in schools, it is clearly patchwork and clearly not good enough, and there is an urgent need to join up delivery on not only this issue, but on the Government’s strategy on violence against women and girls as a whole.

My final point is about the need for a shift in the culture in our country and in the public awareness of the role we can all play. I want to mention the excellent work of Croydon Council, which has taken this issue mainstream by engaging with businesses and other organisations on how they can sometimes be the first line of support for employees who are victims. Building awareness and doing work on joining up provision is not always about resources; it is also about a shift in culture, and that can save lives.

I want to close with a powerful quotation of Ban Ki-moon, which I believe is important for us to note: “Violence against women and girls is a human rights violation, public health pandemic and serious obstacle to sustainable development. It imposes large-scale costs on families, communities and economies. The world cannot afford to pay this price.”

12.38 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), and I congratulate her on leading this debate. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it in the first place.

Gender-based violence is a human rights violation—the hon. Lady is absolutely right—and it is something that women confront in every country across the globe. However, whichever side of the House we sit on, I think we can recognise and be proud of this Government’s
record, and particularly the Prime Minister’s commitment to these issues. She has shown her commitment, on a very personal level, to ending violence against women—not just with warm words, but with very clear action. Ever since I have been an MP—and probably for as long as you have, Madam Deputy Speaker—she has shown that commitment, and we need more countries to have the sort of leadership we have in this country. I was reminded of that only yesterday when I spoke to my counterpart, Mehrezia Labidi, chair of the parliamentary women’s committee in Tunisia, who has been instrumental in pressing forward with a Bill on women’s rights and gender-based violence which would be ground-breaking legislation in the Arab world and deserves all our support.

I would like to echo the words of the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston in paying tribute to the extraordinary work of organisations such as Women’s Aid, Refuge, ActionAid, the End Violence Against Women Coalition, and the EveryDay Sexism Project. They are representative of the kind of civil society that we take for granted but does not always exist in other countries. One of our challenges is how we take forward that sort of learning into other countries around the world.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Miller: Will the right hon. Gentleman forgive me if I make some speedy progress? I do not want to incur the wrath of Madam Deputy Speaker. [Laughter.] I know her well.

The Government’s record at home should be recognised across the House. Their violence against women strategy, which was delivered in March, means that in the UK we really do have a clear practical strategy in place, not only to support victims but to bring perpetrators to justice. New offences have gone hand in hand with work to change culture. It is this Prime Minister who put in place the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to tackle a crime that affects so many women. However, we still have 1.3 million women in this country who experienced domestic violence in the past year, and 400,000 who have been victims of sexual assault. The announcements made by my hon. Friend the Minister yesterday show that this Government are in no way complacent. Measures made by my hon. Friend the Minister yesterday show that this Government are introducing in relation to FGM, particularly the requirement for the NHS to collate data sets on it. Does she have any evidence that that is starting to feed through to an increased level of prosecutions, for instance?

Mrs Miller: Yes, I was going to come on to that. The right hon. Gentleman is stealing my next lines somewhat.

The crime survey statistics show that the number of women experiencing domestic violence is the lowest since the survey began, and there is a downward trend in the prevalence of sexual assaults. At the same time, we are seeing the highest ever levels of convictions for crimes of violence against women. While there is much more to do, the direction of travel is to be applauded. It remains the case, however, that 1.3 million women, potentially, will be listening to this debate and thinking that there is more we could be doing for them.

Chris Elmore: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Miller: I feel that I should now give way to the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady).

Patrick Grady: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way and for the very substantial contribution that she is making. Does she agree that among the different things we can do, it is important that the Government ratify the Istanbul convention in order to show global leadership? Yesterday, in a Westminster Hall debate, we heard about the situation in South Sudan, where 70% of the women in the capital city of Juba have experienced sexual assault during the conflict in that country. It is absolutely horrific. We need to show global leadership by ratifying the convention.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman is right. We have shown global leadership in signing the convention, but we are waiting to ratify it. Having been a Minister in the position of considering how we do so, I know that ministerial colleagues will be continuing to unpick the complexities of making sure that ratification is done in the right way.

I want finally to make two very swift points, because many right hon. and hon. Members want to come in on this debate. I make no bones about it: I am going to focus on two issues that really affect us here in the UK, because while it is right that we look out to the world, we have to look on our own back doorstep as well. One of the biggest challenges of our lives is the way in which we tackle the online world. We need to do more about this. Children now spend more time online than watching television. New and more inventive ways are being presented to us with regard to how perpetrators of violence against women and girls act. Forty-five per cent. of domestic violence survivors experience abuse online, and that abuse is really difficult to escape.

I welcome the legislation that this Government have introduced on online revenge pornography. I was pleased to work with my right hon. Friend the Member for
Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), when he was at the Ministry of Justice, on making sure that we have world-leading legislation in this area, and not only that but help and support for victims through the revenge pornography helpline. I welcome the new guidance that has been issued to schools on sexting. I also welcome the Digital Economy Bill, which, for the first time, starts to put in place laws that recognise that the online world is very different—that is, the laws about age verification for accessing pornography online.

However, we need to go further. I hope that the Law Commission is able to take forward its review of the law in this area. We need a clear legal liability on online media platforms to make sure that women are not abused online; a clear definition of “abuse”; a recognition of the drain on police resources that the current system creates; and perhaps a system of fines for the worst of these offenders. We should not be put off by the fact that this industry transcends international borders, but make sure that it is working for us in our country in the way we want it to work. I echo previous thoughts on the importance of having a proper code of practice, not just paying lip service, as it is at the moment, I am afraid.

The second area we need to focus on was mentioned by the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston in relation to the excellent report produced by the Women and Equalities Committee on sexual harassment. It is excellent because of the wonderful work of the Clerks, not because of the likes of me and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), as much as we try very hard. I thank the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston for giving that report yet more publicity. As she knows from having read it, two out of three young women regularly experience sexual harassment and violence in schools; that develops into a situation where, according to the National Union of Students, 68% of students experience verbal sexual harassment and violence on campuses; and those students then go on into the outside world, where 85% of women experience unwanted sexual attention. It is a cumulative problem that we must deal with.

While there are many things that we can be doing, the most important is making sure that we give young people the kind of knowledge they need to be able to navigate the world better—the knowledge they would get from having compulsory sex and relationship education delivered at school. We must not continue to tackle only the symptoms of the problem of violence against women; we have to tackle the root causes as well. We would no longer tolerate the sort of behaviour that some of us may have had to experience in the workplace 30 years ago, yet we insist that young people keep quiet, do not speak out, and do not get the support they need when they experience such behaviour in schools.

There is a great deal of support for change. I have heard it from the Dispatch Box from my hon. Friend the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities. I hope that in her response to the debate, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), will say that there is widespread support from Ministers across the board to update the guidance and ensure that it is fit for purpose, and to make sure that we listen to the 90% of parents who want compulsory sex and relationship education, and want it now.

Michelle Thomson (Edinburgh West) (Ind): I am going to relay an event that happened to me many years ago. I want to give a very personal perspective to help people, both in this place and outside, understand one element of sexual violence against women.

When I was 14, I was raped. As is common, it was by somebody who was known to me. He had offered to walk me home from a youth event. In those days, everybody walked everywhere—it was quite common. It was early evening. It was not dark. I was wearing—I am imagining and guessing—jeans and a sweatshirt. I knew my way around where I lived—I was very comfortable—and we went a slightly differently way, but I did not think anything of it. He told me that he wanted to show me something in a wooded area. At that point, I must admit that I was alarmed. I did have a warning bell, but I overrode that warning bell because I knew him and, therefore, there was a level of trust in place. To be honest, looking back at that point, I do not think I knew what rape was. It was not something that was talked about. My mother never talked to me about it, and I did not hear other girls or women talking about it.

It was mercifully quick and I remember first of all feeling surprise, then fear, then horror as I realised that I quite simply could not escape, because obviously he was stronger than me. There was no sense, even initially, of any sexual desire from him, which, looking back again, I suppose I find odd. My senses were absolutely numbed, and thinking about it now, 37 years later, I cannot remember hearing anything when I replay it in my mind. As a former professional musician who is very auditory, I find that quite telling. I now understand that your subconscious brain—not your conscious brain—decides on your behalf how you should respond: whether you take flight, whether you fight or whether you freeze. And I froze, I must be honest.

Afterwards I walked home alone. I was crying, I was cold and I was shivering. I now realise, of course, that that was the shock response. I did not tell my mother. I did not tell my father. I did not tell my friends. And I did not tell the police. I bottled it all up inside me. I hoped briefly—and appallingly—that I might be pregnant so that that would force a situation to help me control it. Of course, without support, the capacity and resources that I had within me to process it were very limited.

I was very ashamed. I was ashamed that I had “allowed this to happen to me”. I had a whole range of internal conversations: “I should have known. Why did I go that way? Why did I walk home with him? Why didn’t I understand the danger? Because I was too this, too that.” I felt that I was spoiled and impure; and I really felt revulsion towards myself.

Of course, I detached from the child that I had been up until then. Although in reality, at the age of 14, that was probably the start of my sexual awakening, at that time, remembering back, sex was “something that men did to women”, and perhaps this incident reinforced that early belief.
I briefly sought favour elsewhere and I now understand that even a brief period of hypersexuality is about trying to make sense of an incident and reframing the most intimate of acts. My oldest friends, with whom I am still friends, must have sensed a change in me, but because I never told them they did not know of the cause. I allowed myself to drift away from them for quite a few years. Indeed, I found myself taking time off school and staying at home on my own, listening to music and reading and so on.

I did have a boyfriend in the later years of school and he was very supportive when I told him about it, but I could not make sense of my response—and it is my response that gives weight to the event. I carried that guilt, anger, fear, sadness and bitterness for years.

When I got married 12 years later, I felt that I had a duty tell my husband. I wanted him to understand why there was this swaddled kernel of extreme emotion at the very heart of me, which I knew he could sense. But for many years I simply could not say the words without crying—I could not say the words. It was only in my mid-40s that I took some steps to go and get help.

It had a huge effect on me and it fundamentally—and fatally—undermined my self-esteem, my confidence and my sense of self-worth. Despite this, I am blessed in my life: I have been happily married for 25 years. But if this happened to her and she could not share it with me, I would be appalled. It was possibly cowardly, but I was the effect of one small, albeit significant, event in my life stage, how must it be for those women who are carrying it on a day-by-day basis?

I thought carefully about whether I should speak about this today, and it was people’s intake of breath and the comment, “What? You’re going to talk about this?”, that motivated me to do it, because there is still a taboo about sharing this kind of information. Certainly for people of my generation, it is truly shocking to talk in public about this sort of thing.

As has been said, rape does not just affect the woman; it affects the family as well. Before my mother died early of cancer, I really wanted to tell her, but I could not bring myself to do it. I have a daughter and if something happened to her and she could not share it with me, I would be appalled. It was possibly cowardly, but it was an act of love that meant that I protected my mother.

As an adult, of course I now know that rape is not about sex at all—it is all about power and control, and it is a crime of violence. I still pick up on when the myths of rape are perpetuated—a man perspective: “Surely you could have fought him off. Did you scream loudly enough?” And the suggestion by some men that a woman is giving subtle hints or is making it up is outrageous. Those assumptions put the woman at the heart of cause, when she should be at the heart of effect. A rape happens when a man makes a decision to hurt someone he feels he can control. Rapes happen because of the rapist, not because of the victim.

We women in our society have to stand up for each other. We have to be courageous. We have to call things out and say where things are wrong. We have to support and nurture our sisters as we do with our sons. Like many women of my age, I have on occasion encountered other aggressive actions towards me, both in business and in politics. But one thing that I realise now is that I am not scared and he was. I am not scared. I am not a victim. I am a survivor.
reduction in the terrible crimes that we are discussing. I am proud to have contributed to the work of the Women and Equalities Committee, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller)—she is not in her place at the moment—on the pure commitment and leadership she has shown to make the Committee effective, bold and vital to the work of the House. The strategy and the £80 million of associated funding that we have heard about will go some way towards fighting violence against women. I am especially pleased that, as we have heard, £20 million more will go towards supporting women’s refuges and helping councils to provide further accommodation for those—often women—who are fleeing violent partners.

I want to touch on three key areas on which I feel I can contribute to this debate: human trafficking, stalking and the international effort to stop violence against women. Human trafficking is widely accepted to be a form of violence directed against women. The police and other authorities identified at least 3,266 people last year who were thought to have been victims of modern slavery. I suspect, as we must all do, that the real number—including those who go undetected—is much higher.

The Government are doing excellent work to increase the rate of detection and liberate modern slaves from their abusers. Victims of modern slavery are often women who have been sold a lie. They are forced, with threats of violence, into this country and into degrading and dangerous servitude. While we debate this motion in a palace beside the river, women in this city are being beaten, enslaved and forced into prostitution. No effort is too great, and we must leave no stone unturned in finding and punishing the gangs responsible for those hideous crimes.

I welcome the work that the first Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner, Kevin Hyland, is doing. I hope that his recent report will shine a light on the acts of these despicable criminal gangs, and that we will capture and bring to justice the gangs that exploit our women. The Department for International Development “Work in Freedom” programme has reached more than 200,000 people so far, and I am delighted that the Government are supporting DFID’s aid budget.

Under section 111 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012, the Government created two new stalking offences. The more serious of the two is the section 4A offence, which is defined as:

“Stalking involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress”.

There, again, we see the recurring theme of women facing the threat of violence. The number of prosecutions has risen dramatically every year, from 91 in the first six months to more than 1,100 commenced in 2014-15. In December 2015, the Home Office published a consultation on the introduction of a stalking protection order for cases of “stranger stalking”.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for his work and focus on that terrible crime, and I share with him personal experience of it from my former career. I was also affected by the confusion surrounding the Data Protection Act—the idea that it was safe for me not to know the identity of the person who was stalking me because of data protection concerns. It was a terrible personal experience.

The summary of the consultation responses was published yesterday. An astonishing 20% of respondents stressed that there was a lack of understanding of stalking among professionals, including the police, and, sadly, a continued failure to take it seriously. Interestingly, it appears that the consultation responses are broadly in favour of increasing the strength of the law in this area. I absolutely agree, and I am very pleased that the Government have announced that they will introduce a new civil stalking protection order. That is a good measure, which should go some way to strengthening the law.

Finally, I want to touch on the international effort. I congratulate the Secretary of State for International Development on her work in this area. We are contributing £8 million to the UN trust fund to end violence against women and £35 million to the programme to reduce female genital mutilation, and that money is having an effect. Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of going to the Women of the Year lunch, at which one attendee took me to one side and said that she applauded the Conservative party and our Government for tackling FGM. She said that our Prime Minister had led the way in this matter. She went on to say that we were the only party that realised that we had nothing in it for us, so we were able to go where others had not dared to tread.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My hon. Friend is so right about FGM. The issue has slightly gone off the burner in the last few months, and it must come back again. Does she agree that it is absolutely vital that we get proper prosecutions? Does she also agree on the importance of the International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014, which is being implemented by the Government?

Mims Davies: I was very proud to sit at the Women of the Year lunch with some really diverse and fantastic ladies from around the country who had done a great deal of positive work in this area, and to know that people felt that we had gone into an area that had been left and ignored for a long time. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

The UK’s contribution to women’s rights organisations is critical to ensure that there is an international and co-ordinated effort to deal with the crimes that we are discussing. The debate is part of that effort, and I am delighted to contribute to it. The UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women is, as we have heard, held on 25 November, and the 16 days of vital activism highlight all the important issues. We have made the UK one of the leading voices in the world, and I am proud to support the Government in doing so.

Many statistics have been cited to describe the truly enormous amount of work that needs to be done. However, these are not just statistics; they are mothers, daughters, sisters, nieces, friends and colleagues. If we are truly to end violence against women and girls, we need to make sure that there is no part of the world, state or society where the abuse of women is allowed, and no lack of laws, laws left unused or inappropriate laws that mean such abuse is allowed. We need to crush the human trafficking gangs, and we need to strengthen our institutional resolve to fight violence in this country. More needs to be done so that no sister is left behind, or, even worse, ever feels that she is left so.
1.10 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I was 20, and the worst thing that I could ever imagine happening to me was about to take place. I was going to be one of those very rare statistics of a woman who is attacked by a stranger, not by someone she knows. I was in my second year at university. The man had seen me walk past his car, and had waited ahead for me to turn the corner. As I came up against him, all those words of advice given to me by my mum—"Knee him where it hurts, then run like hell"—disappeared. I was frozen in fear. As he shoved me to the ground, trying to rape me, I fought back, but I was battered. It was only the community spirited Indian neighbour further down the road who saved me from something worse.

I count myself as one of the lucky ones. I had managed to memorise his car number plate, and he was caught an hour later. He went to court; not many do. He pleaded guilty; I did not have to go through the horrors of a trial. He was sentenced; I did not have to look over my shoulder, checking if he was following me. He was a stranger; I did not have to wake up in the same bed as him, or go to work with him as my boss. He did not use a broken bottle to hurt me. He was alone, not with a group of other men. It was only once, not several times.

The point to this story is that even though, on the scale of violence against women, I was lucky because justice was done, the following few years were hard. I got afraid walking alone, so I bought a bike. I got scared in the night, so I slept with a knife. I was easily startled, and cried at the drop of a hat. However, again, I was lucky. I did not have a job to keep down, children to care for or elderly relatives to see to. I could work my way through the impact of this violent assault at my own speed and in my own space.

A new investigation by Nata Duvvury recognises that violence against women is a global health emergency and that it can have an impact on the GDP of a country. After a woman experiences violence, as I did, the hours, days and weeks a community and family have to spend taking care of the affected woman have a quantifiable financial impact on her community through the loss of her unseen caring responsibilities and work contributions.

As I said at the beginning, there are all sorts of versions of violence against women—domestic abuse, sexual assault, child abuse, actual bodily harm, murder. Every assault is very different: some are one-offs, like mine, but for others, violence is a regular and painful part of the fabric of their lives. At least one in four women experience domestic violence in their lifetime. On average, a woman is assaulted 35 times before her first call to the police. The police receive one domestic violence call every minute in the UK. Just to reiterate, one woman, who has probably been hurt 35 times before having the courage to do so, rings the police every minute. Sadly, as we know, domestic violence can often end in the death of the woman. As my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) has pointed out, 936 women were killed by men in England and Wales during a six-year period, which is one every three days—I repeat, one every three days.

1.17 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Violence against women and girls is an abomination. That may not require restatement, but I am enormously proud that this Parliament is today noting the UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. If I may say so, I am also hugely proud to witness the most powerful, cogent, eloquent and articulate speeches made today, particularly by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson), the hon. Member for Batley
and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies). It is a matter of great pride that Members of this House have spoken so powerfully.

I want to say a few words about stalking, which my hon. Friend mentioned. So much progress has been made in this area in recent years and progress continues to be made, but one piece of the jigsaw needs to be inserted. Stalking is a horrible, violating crime that rips apart relationships, destroys careers and can cause lasting mental harm. All too often, it is the gateway to serious violence. In the words of the Home Secretary in her excellent article for The Daily Telegraph this week:

“Victims can be tormented for years”,

and left

“too afraid to leave the house.”

The point about stalking is that it is no respecter of fame or fortune. We have heard about the cases of Lily Allen, Keira Knightley and Shingai Shoniwa from the Noisettes, but ordinary men and women—particularly women—can also be targeted.

In her article, the Home Secretary referred to doctors being targeted by patients, and she may well have had my constituent Dr Ellie Aston in mind. I will not go through every last detail of the ordeal she suffered, but it went on for seven years. The patient turned up at her surgery over 100 times, and he posted foul items through the letter box. He followed her on patient visits, slashed her tyres and appeared at a child’s birthday party. In her case, the defendant served a short prison sentence. However, in a pattern that is not uncommon in this kind of case, having served his sentence, he restarted his campaign. She started to receive packages at her surgery and at her home in Cheltenham. One of the packages simply read, “Guess who’s back?” When he was arrested again, a search of his computer revealed that he had made the inquiry “How long after a person disappears are they assumed dead?” As Members might expect, the effect was profound. She was advised by police to change her name and job, and move address, and it was suggested that she should come off the General Medical Council register—but she is the victim in all this. She unsurprisingly developed post-traumatic stress disorder.

Given that context, I strongly welcome the Government’s response. First in 2012, they recognised stalking as an offence—that is excellent. Secondly, we have the new protection of victims of stalking through the stalker protection orders, which, if breached, can carry a jail sentence of up to five years. They are a really positive step. They enable the police to ask courts to impose restrictions, and can restrict access to the internet and require mental health treatment.

That is all excellent. But the orders have to be seen in their proper context. The truth is that all they are is orders. An order is in effect a requirement from someone in authority that a person should alter their behaviour. Important as that is, sadly those who perpetrate this kind of activity all too often show themselves unwilling or unable to observe boundaries or respect authority. They do not obey the quiet word from the neighbourhood police community support officer, the letter from the local police station, the formal harassment warning, the civil injunction and so on. Although the orders are welcome, and in appropriate circumstances may serve to nip some obsessions in the bud, they are unlikely to assist where that obsession has become ingrained.

That is why I respectfully suggest that for those most serious cases, in which the victims’ lives are made a living hell and they live in constant fear, we need to give the courts the powers they need to protect victims. That means treating stalking as a serious crime, not a minor offence. The reality is that when a stalker pleads guilty to the most serious imaginable offence, which could, by the way, be a repeat offence, the maximum he—and it is usually a he—can end up serving is just 20 months. The judge in the case of my constituent said that he did not have the tools he needed. When he was passing sentence at Gloucester Crown court, his honour Judge Tabor QC said:

“I have no doubt at all that you are dangerous in the sense that you pose a significant risk to her”—that is the victim—“in future in terms of causing her serious harm... I am frustrated that the maximum sentence...is five years. I would, if I could, give you longer.”

Therein lies the problem. In the most serious cases, only when the stalker is in custody can the victims feel free—free to rebuild shattered lives, careers, relationships, confidence and mental health. No one is suggesting, least of all me, that in all cases we should lock people up and throw away the key or that people should be denied mental health treatment—one of the above. But in those most serious cases, where we know stalking can be a gateway to serious violence, our absolute priority must be to protect victims, and that means a sentence that is commensurate with the gravity of the offence. In due course I will therefore be inviting the Government to extend the sentences for stalking. Only by doing so can we truly protect victims of this horrible crime.

1.22 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I commend hon. Friends and colleagues for their incredibly powerful contributions. I congratulate the hon. Members for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on supporting this Backbench Business debate. It is absolutely necessary that we have such an important debate on the Floor of the House. It is through contributions such as that of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson) and my friend from the Women and Equalities Committee, the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), that we are able to give a voice to these important matters.

The UN initiative of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women serves to remind us of some of the worst human rights abuses imaginable. Violence against women persists in systematic abuse across the globe. I echo the sentiment of the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston that women’s rights are human rights. Although large strides have been made in recent years, as we have already heard there is still a long way to go. More than 20 years after the UN General Assembly declaration on the elimination of
violence against women, one in three women still experiences physical or sexual violence, mostly from an intimate partner.

Violence against women encompasses wide ranges of abuse, including domestic violence, sexual violence, female genital mutilation, honour killings and trafficking. These are abhorrent acts, and we all have a part to play in their eradication. In the words of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon:

"Break the silence. When you witness violence against women and girls, do not sit back. Act."

I ask the Government to follow that command and act.

We are in the middle of the UNiTE campaign's 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, which runs from 25 November to 10 December.

Patrick Grady: The 16 days are being marked by all kinds of activity across the country and indeed, increasingly, around the world. The Maryhill women’s centre in my constituency does incredible work supporting women from all walks of life, especially those who have been affected by gender-based violence, and is having a series of events. Does my hon. Friend welcome the centre’s activities and those going on across the country?

Angela Crawley: I welcome every single effort across the UK to eradicate violence and to raise awareness of this important subject.

This year’s UNiTE 16 days of action seek to raise funds to resource the services that do vital work each and every day to end violence against women and girls, in response to a major shortfall in resources and tightening budgets; the campaign is doing all it can to raise awareness. Frameworks such as the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, which includes a specific target for ending violence against women, need adequate funding if they are to result in significant change. That new global development agenda was adopted and ratified by every UN member state this year. It aims to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.”

Big projects are taking place worldwide. For example, the non-governmental organisation Physicians for Human Rights is working in Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo with doctors, nurses, police, lawyers and judges to enhance access to justice for survivors of sexual violence, and UN Women is working in Ethiopia, Jordan and Myanmar to develop essential health and legal services for women subjected to violence. However, funding and support are also needed closer to home.

I take this opportunity to recognise the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on the rape clause campaign, that of my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) on the white ribbon campaign, and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) over many years on gender-based violence. I invite all right hon. and hon. Members to support her private Member's Bill next week seeking to prevent and combat violence against women and girls, and asking the Government to ratify the Istanbul convention. I remind all Members that article 1 of that convention states:

“The purposes of this Convention are to... prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence ...contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women”

and girls in law and in practice. I also take this opportunity to commend the work of Dr Marsha Scott of Scottish Women’s Aid and all the staff of Women’s Aid South Lanarkshire for their work each and every day.

Turning to the domestic sphere, it could be argued that the UK Government place survivors of violence at risk through the operation of the child maintenance service. The service operates on a basis whereby the parent caring for children is charged a 4% collection fee for using it, amounting to an additional tax on a parent who has suffered domestic violence. There is an alternative: the caring parent can avoid the child maintenance tax by giving their bank details to the other parent directly, in what is known as a family-based arrangement. I have heard from constituents who are survivors of domestic violence who are too frightened to establish a family-based arrangement because of the legitimate fear that their abuser will be able to access their personal details or, where they have moved to a place of safety through fear that their life is in danger, to locate them.

What must the Government do to resolve that? They must consider the fact that women who have fled situations of domestic violence in certain circumstances are often pushed into poverty through having to flee their abuser. They could remove the additional 4% tax; and they could also issue clear guidance on ways in which women can get the tax removed, and provide clarity on the evidence required to make sure they are eligible for this removal. This should not be an arduous process. I am sure the Government would seek to amend it to ensure that it did not create problems.

It is all very well for the Government to encourage parents who have separated amicably to set up their own arrangement for paying child support as a cost-saving exercise, but a maintenance tax on victims of domestic violence is not a feasible option for domestic abuse survivors. Child support payments are often relied on as a way to establish a safe and independent life for domestic abuse survivors and their children, so to charge them puts the lives of the survivors and their children at risk. I hope the Minister will seek to address this issue and make a real commitment to these women, who are trying to put their lives back together and give their children a safe and happy childhood.

In Scotland, we are committed to tackling domestic violence. It is the priority of the Scottish Government. I recognise that the Scottish Government’s commitment to tackling domestic violence through legislation and in law is far ahead of the rest of the UK, but I am sure that the UK Government will commit to following in the steps of the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government are bringing forward a Bill to create a specific offence of domestic abuse. This will cover not only physical abuse but forms of psychological and coercive controlling behaviour that cannot easily be prosecuted under existing criminal law. This law will of course cover male and female perpetrators although, as the figures show, women are more often the victims of violence and they will benefit most from this protection in law. It will not only act as a deterrent, but make it clear that these sorts of behaviours are socially unacceptable.

The Government have a chance to make a statement and commit to ratifying the Istanbul convention, either today or next week by supporting the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan. The Government have taken an approach to child maintenance...
which isethically dubious and practically dangerous, and it must be addressed. Systematic violence in
relationships must be tackled appropriately, and we must address the serious issue with the child maintenance
service and survivors of domestic violence.

Every little girl deserves to grow up feeling safe and free from online abuse, stalking, violence, rape, sexual
assault or the fear of being killed. These are criminal offences. Every little girl deserves to grow up feeling
safe.

1.32 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I first want to pay a massive tribute to Members who have
told their own personal stories today. For so many people, the victims of domestic and sexual violence
look like someone else—they look like the “other” when in fact they are all of us, and it is incredibly
powerful to show that. In fact, they are everybody. They are living on our streets. We are sitting next to them
at work. We are talking to them on the school run. They are everywhere. I pay a huge tribute to those who have
done that today. The memorable women in here will certainly resonate with people out there.

Last week, I dealt with a very upset mother on the phone. Her daughter had, while at school, had to deal
with two boys in a dinner queue throwing insults at each other about how they had had sex with her. These
children were nine years old. When the mother spoke to her daughter about the incident, the little girl said she
felt ashamed. She thought she had done something wrong and that was why the boys were saying this about
her. And so begins the life of another young girl who thinks she is to blame for the misogyny she faces, and
will probably face for the rest of her life.

That is the example I heard last week. During the inquiry into sexual harassment in schools undertaken
by the Women and Equalities Committee, we heard a huge amount of similar evidence. It felt like lifting up
a huge rock on a problem that has existed for too long, and is holding back both young girls and young boys. In
my time working with local schools in partnership with Women’s Aid, I heard hundreds of stories of girls who
were harassed, assaulted, raped and sexually exploited—all before they were 16. I would hazard a guess—I think
the debate has shown this—that every woman in this building has a tale to tell about being a teenager and
having boys or men groping them, trying to lift up their skirts, talking about have sex with them and scaring
them.

When I told my 11-year-old son, who has just started secondary school, about what had happened to the little
girl, he shrugged and said, “I hear that stuff all the time, mom.” When I look at the Government’s response to
the Select Committee’s report, I am left exasperated. As a parent, I am worried. Should I sit with my son and the
little girl in question and say, “Don’t worry, there is cross-Government support for prioritising work to make
significant progress in this area”? I am sure their shame
will not be at all reduced.

Just after I was elected, I went to speak at a conference in Birmingham on tackling violence against women and
girls—I am sure that’s a surprise to everyone! The room was filled with police officers, children’s social workers,
housing managers, doctors, nurses, teachers and charities—all specialists in their field. I asked them to raise their
hands if they thought that the single biggest change in the prevention of violence and abuse of young women
was to make sex and relationship and consent education mandatory in our schools. Every single person raised
their hand.

Year after year, this House has been given a chance to pass this much needed law. Obviously, the Government
were a little ahead of their time in refusing to listen to the experts, because every time the proposal has been passed
before the House, this House has failed to pass it. I want to know why. I want the Minister, who I know cares
deply about this, to put down the red folders, throw away her notes, throw caution to the wind—I’ve made a
career out of it—and tell me honestly why this is. In the
days of David Cameron, we were always led to believe,
by whispers, that someone at No. 10 was stopping it. We
in the preventing violence against women and girls
sector were constantly assured by people in the Home
Office that the then Home Secretary agreed with us.
Well, she is in No. 10 now, and still some sort of
conservatism with a small “c” stands in the way of what
over 90% of parents want for their children and what
100% of experts know would make the difference.

I do not want to hear “We are looking into this’, “We
support the calls” and “We are taking firm action.” I do
not want to be pointed to another strategy document
that proves nothing more than our ability to write
strategy documents. I have been hearing it for years, and
now I want a real answer as to why this law has not been
passed. I know it has support across this House and in
every party. We must act and start having open
conversations with our children about gendered attitudes
that lead to the harassment of girls and young women,
and the demonisation of boys and young men.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My hon.
Friend is making a very powerful speech and of course I
agree with every word. Like her, before becoming an
MP I spent my life in the domestic and sexual violence
world. Does she agree that we really need proper, high-
quality and well integrated perpetrator programmes, as
well as sex and relationships education? The one does
prevention and the other tries to make things better
when things do not work out, but they must be of a high
standard. Will she join me in calling for the Istanbul
convention to be ratified by this country, and for all
Members to be in the House a week tomorrow to do
that?

Jess Phillips: I thank my hon. Friend and of course I
agree with every word. It is very important to stress that
the Select Committee heard amazing evidence from
some brilliant organisations working specifically
with men and boys in this space. They showed how much
could be done. If we do not focus on the attitudes of
men who commit violence, and on boys who will become
those men who commit violence, we will be letting the
side down. I stress that I have seen bad practice in this
space of work with perpetrators. Local commissioning
must be done by experts in the field, and the organisation
my hon. Friend worked for is exactly that.

We are here to speak about the elimination of violence,
not cleaning up afterwards. Every year, I stand and read
the names of women murdered at the hands of violent
men. It is only through prevention and culture change that each and every year that list will grow shorter. Ministers have the power to reduce that list, and I will sing their praises if they do. Talking to our children about consent, gendered attitudes and respect is the very best place to start.

1.40 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am honoured to follow the powerful speech from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who clearly has much experience in this area. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting a debate on what everyone agrees is a very important subject—one once regarded as taboo, as was referred to, so powerfully, by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson). Hers was a deeply moving speech that I think will help to move this cause forward. I really do applaud her.

The fact that we are holding this debate shows how the taboo is being broken. Is it not great that we can discuss these things? With the lead of a Prime Minister utterly committed to change in this area, and with the cross-party consensus, further progress can be made. As we have heard so eloquently today, violence against women and girls has a devastating impact, not only on the lives of the victims, but on their families and all those close to them. It has enormous knock-on effects also on the criminal justice system and the health service and puts a strain on local authorities and police services, all of which have to deal with these issues on the ground. Avon and Somerset police service reports that it is one of the fastest growing categories of crime.

Local charities and organisations that support women and girls who have been victims of violence do much excellent work, and I want to commend some such charities in my constituency. Taunton Women’s Aid does excellent work with the local community by offering practical support in its drop-in sessions—for women and men. It also works closely with other charities, such as Mind, to develop school workshops—many colleagues have referred to the importance of education—where people can talk about domestic abuse and mental health issues.

Another fine Taunton-based charity working in this area is Stand Against Violence, which runs school workshops focusing on personal safety, anger and aggression, basic life support and the awareness of choices and their consequences. I know the gentleman who runs the organisation. He set it up because when only a teenager his brother was tragically set upon and murdered by a group of young people. Out of that goes into schools to talk about how we cannot live like that. It is important that we get across these messages, particularly to the opposite sex, about controlling abuse and aggression, and that is exactly what Stand Against Violence does.

Complementing the work of those charities, Taunton Deane Borough Council and Somerset County Council are offering services to support women who have been victims of violence. Some housing associations are also doing excellent work. Knightstone housing association, which operates across the south-west, runs a domestic abuse service, which it started in 2015, offering a 24/7 helpline and providing emergency accommodation across the country. It is a particularly good model, run in conjunction with Somerset County Council, and is moving us towards a much more comprehensive and integrated service as part of Somerset’s groundbreaking integrated domestic abuse service. It is the kind of model that we should be encouraging others to follow.

I am pleased that this excellent local work is being backed up by the commitment from the Government and their provision of a sound framework upon which to stimulate the necessary shift in attitudes that many colleagues have mentioned. Violence against women and girls is everybody’s business, not just that of charities and worthy Members of Parliament. If we can get that message through to adults and children, we will make a real difference.

The violence against women and girls strategy, published in March 2016, has been allocated £80 million and is bringing together the significant advances in legislation that colleagues have mentioned, including the specific offences relating to stalking. I welcome the new stalking civil protection order and the coercive and controlling behaviour legislation. As a great “Archers” fan, I also think that its storyline has helped to raise awareness. I personally was not really aware of it. It was utterly shocking and really brought it to the fore. There is also the legislation on failing to protect women and girls from female genital mutilation and revenge pornography. The strategy recognises, however, that there are still many challenges ahead and that all too often these crimes remain hidden. If we are truly to tackle them, we must bring those crimes out of the shadows. With 1.3 million women a year still experiencing domestic abuse and 400,000 sexual assaults in the last year, there is still much to do.

I welcome the Government’s continued four-pronged approach, bringing together prevention, the provision of services, partnership and the pursuing of perpetrators. This approach, which is definitely the way forward, has been in place since 2010 and is starting to work. Although I have just given some shocking statistics, the crime survey in England and Wales shows that the number of women who experienced domestic abuse in the past year is the lowest since the survey began, which is welcome news, and that prosecutions and convictions are up, so perhaps we are moving in the right direction.

I want to give a special mention to the £15 million to launch the Government’s three-year violence against women and girls service transformation fund, the purpose of which is to aid and facilitate best practice—perhaps the programme I mentioned earlier is an example of best practice. That is on top of the £20 million available for accommodation-based services announced by the Department for Communities and Local Government. The transformation fund is open to commissioners working in partnership with specialist groups, police and crime commissioners, local authorities and health groups, and I would encourage all those groups to get together, to form working groups—perhaps Members could run roundtables and get people together—and to formulate bids, because the money is there for people to take advantage of, and I welcome it.

I welcome the lead that the Government, particularly our Prime Minister, are taking on this very serious issue, but there is a lot more to do, and it is essential that we all work together to banish the prospect of any
woman having to live in fear of violence. As a mother of two daughters, I believe that every girl should grow up knowing she is safe.

1.48 pm

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for bringing this debate to the House and for speaking so powerfully. We have heard some brilliant speeches, but I want to commend in particular the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for so bravely sharing their personal experiences. We all listened and learned a lot. I hope that their speeches have a wider impact.

I want to touch on some international issues. A couple of months ago, I had the privilege of visiting Sierra Leone. It was humbling to see this country struggling to recover from the effects of an Ebola epidemic that took 11,000 lives there. In the midst of the chaos of this horrendous epidemic, Sierra Leone decided to ban the procedure of female genital mutilation. However, Sierra Leone was declared Ebola-free in March this year, and the ban on FGM has sadly now been lifted. Women in Sierra Leone are being repressed by FGM. It is an ancient practice in Sierra Leonean culture, cultivating a heritage of fear among young women. It is reported by the World Health Organisation that 88% of Sierra Leonean girls have been “cut”, to use the commonly used description of this dreadful practice.

Globally, 200 million women and girls have undergone female genital mutilation. Culturally, the procedure is alleged to protect communities against wayward and evil spirits, and it is seen as the final passage from adolescence to womanhood. In reality, it is imposed on girls by a matriarchal society, forcing the younger members of the community to join the faction and structure of society, which in turn controls women—and it becomes a vicious circle in which the “tradition” of FGM, if I may refer to it in that way, is passed on to the next generation.

While I was in Sierra Leone, we visited the country’s Parliament and spoke with its MPs who were at the time considering a law to ban FGM below the age of 18 and to introduce a requirement for “consent” to be given. In reality, it would be difficult to prove that consent had been given, especially in the isolated villages and townships outside of the capital Freetown, but it must be welcomed as a very small step in the right direction. There is an enormously long way to go before this vile practice is banned outright and internationally.

**Angela Crawley**: Does the hon. Lady accept that here in the UK, young girls, during what is known as “cutting season”, are taken to their home countries for FGM and then returned to the UK, and that that practice must also be stopped?

**Liz McInnes**: I thank the hon. Lady for that important intervention. Yes, sadly, I am all too well aware of that practice. I am sure that she has constituents raising that issue with her. I, too, have been contacted by church groups about families that they are trying to protect.

Moving on, even when the legislative process finally enshrines protection against violence towards women, the journey will not have ended; legislation is just the beginning. Afghanistan epitomises that struggle. In 2009, women’s rights activists successfully fought and campaigned to implement an executive order of the Elimination of Violence Against Women Bill, which put into the constitution the fundamental right to protect its female citizens. Since then, however, the situation has systematically deteriorated.

In 2013, Special Representative Jan Kubis of the UN Secretary-General in Afghanistan told the UN Security Council:

“The majority of women killed is linked to domestic violence, tradition, culture of the country, but women activists have been deliberately targeted.”

Since the continued withdrawal of British and US troops, the situation has escalated. Amnesty International reported this year:

“It has been increasingly dangerous over recent years to be a woman in public life in Afghanistan, and there has been a growing body count of women who have been brave enough to ignore the risks. With the withdrawal of international forces and the deterioration we are seeing in women’s rights, there is every reason to fear that these dangers will become even worse in the years ahead.”

Nearly seven years on, Afghan women are still under serious threat and violence is on the rise. In the first eight months of 2016, the Afghan Attorney General’s Office received 3,700 cases of violence against women, with 5,000 cases recorded in 2015.

As well as deep-rooted historical, religious or cultural diktats, newly formed technological changes have had detrimental effects on women. Women cannot only be victimised in civil society; it has seeped into the virtual sphere. As many colleagues have mentioned, the internet and, in particular, social media have fuelled gender violence. Even here in the European Union, one in 10 women and teenage girls reports having experienced cyber-harassment. This includes threats of rape and unsolicited sexually explicit images.

In Bangladesh, a group of bloggers were targeted by a militant group because of their posts supporting religious freedoms and the promotion of women’s rights. All 84 of the group were put on a hit list. One prominent blogger, Shammi Haque, had to leave the country and her family because of the threats on her life. A member of a militant organisation put a bounty on her head.

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Among those targeted was blogger, Shammi Haque, who had to leave the country and her family because of the threats on her life. A member of a militant organisation put a bounty on her head.

She was granted asylum in Germany earlier this year, but even after escaping to Germany, Shammi was still at risk. A political leader in Bangladesh began collecting money through a crowdfunding platform to pay for a ticket to Germany so that someone could be “sent over to rape her”.

Many of us in this House have received threats online, but it did not mean fleeing our country, our home and our families. Yet the online tone in the UK is becoming more personal and more vitriolic and threatening towards women. Only this week, the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) was subjected to an abhorrent online threat, leading to a man being arrested, while earlier this year, the right hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley ( Jess Phillips) had to have her house locks changed in similar circumstances. Again, just this week, a man has been arrested after online threats against Gina Miller, the woman who launched a legal challenge
against the Brexit process. Also this week, a 24-year-old
man was found guilty of racially aggravated harassment
of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree
(Luciana Berger).

The statistics and stories we have heard this afternoon
are shocking, disturbing and fundamentally unjust. As
an elected female Member of Parliament, I am fortunate
to have a platform where I can speak not for myself, but
for those without a voice, for those women and girls
who are forced to live in silence, who are not treated
with dignity and who do not have the right to equality. I
hope that this debate will lead to further conversations
and further progression on eliminating violence against
women and girls.

1.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure
to speak on this issue. Let me first congratulate right
hon. and hon. Members who put their names to this
debate on bringing it forward so that we can all participate.
I thank them very much for that. There have been some
excellent speeches, but I would single out in particular
the contribution of the hon. Member for Edinburgh
West (Michelle Thomson). I doubt whether any Member
in their place today could have failed to be moved by
her story. I thank her greatly for giving us the opportunity
to hear such a personal story put across so well.

I recently attended an event on this issue at Westminster,
and I was again shocked by the research carried out for
that debate. It is beyond me how in this day and age
we tend to reel off statistics, but they are important,
because they show what is happening in society. I want
to cite, in a little more detail, some statistics that may
have already been mentioned. Two women are killed
every week in England and Wales by a current or
former partner. As we heard from the hon. Member for
Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), one woman is
ekilled every three days. One in four women in England
and Wales will experience domestic violence in their
lifetime, and 8% will suffer domestic violence in any
given year. Globally, one in three women will experience
violence at the hands of a male partner. Domestic
violence has a higher rate of repeat victimisation than
any other crime.

Every minute police in the United Kingdom receive a
domestic assistance call, but only 35% of domestic
violence incidents are reported to the police. We need to
do something about that, but I am not sure what should
be done. Is it a case of raising awareness, or a case of
ensuring that when people go to the police, they receive
the response that they need?

The 2001-02 British Crime Survey found that there
were an estimated 635,000 incidents of domestic violence
in England and Wales during that period; 81% of the
victims were women and 19% were men. Nearly 22% of
all violent incidents reported by participants in the BCS
were incidents of domestic violence. That is a massive
proportion. On average—this statistic worried me
particularly—a woman is assaulted 35 times before her
first call to the police: only then does the lady have the
courage to report those assaults. We must encourage
women to go to the police at an early stage, so that we
do not end up with the horrific stories that we are
hearing. Other Members have told such stories today,
and I want to make it clear that I understand the issues.

Like others, I welcome the news of a legislative
change to deal with stalking, and I thank the Government
for what they are doing. Let us give credit where it is
due. I understand that the new legislation will enable
the problem to be dealt with at an early stage, so that
rather than someone being stalked two or three times
and then complaining to the police, the stalking will be
stopped at the outset. That is certainly a step in the right
direction. I have attended some meetings in the House
to discuss the issue, and I am aware of the great fear and
threat that people feel when they are stalked, almost as
prey, by people who do not seem to care what happens
to them. We need a strong law to deal with that.
In 2014-15, the 24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline, which is open to anyone who is affected by domestic violence, managed 27,923 calls. Most calls to the service continue to be from women—and that is what this debate is about. There were 611 sexual violence calls to the helpline, from 518 female callers and 93 male callers, and 58% of women callers disclosed mental health issues as a result of that violence. The effect on family members moves me greatly. I find, as an elected representative, that constituents have heart-rending stories to tell that move me to tears, and I am sure that other Members have had the same experience.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has referred to the mental health effects of violence against women. It concerns me that women in my constituency who have been victims of rape cannot gain access to the counselling and support services that they require. There is nothing in Slough, so they have to go to Wycombe or Reading. Moreover, the waiting list means that women who experience this devastation must wait for up to 20 months. I urge the Minister to require. There is nothing in Slough, so they have to go to Wycombe or Reading. Moreover, the waiting list means that women who experience this devastation must wait for up to 20 months. I urge the Minister to promise Government investment to deal with that horrible delay.

Jim Shannon: I know that the right hon. Lady takes a very compassionate approach to this subject. We should all consider her wise words, and I hope that the Minister and the Government will respond to them positively.

In 2014-15, 533 women—an increase of 79 on the previous year—and 226 children were referred to Women's Aid refuges. Yesterday, in Westminster Hall, we had a debate on South Sudan, and some of the statistics that we heard were equally horrendous. Some 70% of women in certain parts of the area have been subjected to sexual violence in either a minor or an extensive form. Abuse is almost inherent in some societies throughout the world. Given that this is International Women's Day, let us speak not just for our women at home in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but for women throughout the world, as the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston and others have already done.

I have been privileged to meet a lady called Michelle Akintoye, the chief executive officer of Britafrique. On 22 November, an event was held in the House involving a panel of speakers and people who had been sent invitations. The purpose of the event was to celebrate universal children’s day and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Members of the police were present, and solicitors and people involved in matrimonial and family law were on the panel. There was a very good crowd there, asking questions, and many of the questions concerned violence at home, in this great city of London. That gives us an idea of the magnitude of what has taken place.

I hate the fact that 25% of women—one in four—will experience domestic violence in their lifetimes. That statistic should be in a history book rather than in an article in today’s paper, or tomorrow’s paper, or Sunday’s paper. The question is, what are we in the House doing to play our part, not simply during these 16 days of action, but in the lifetime of this Parliament? What education are we providing to raise a generation who will abhor this violence, and who will know that there is no shame in seeking help? We need to encourage women to respond, and to have access to centres throughout the United Kingdom—in Slough and elsewhere—which they can contact whenever they need them. That generation will know that they are worth too much to have to put up with emotional and physical abuse. Let me ask the Minister this: how are we training our young men to value women, and our young women to value themselves? It is our duty to answer those questions today, and if we do not have the right answers, we have a duty to get them right.

I thank the Members who initiated this debate. Let me end by issuing a challenge to every Member who has spoken today, and to those who have not been able to attend the debate. How can we make changes here that will make changes in the quality of life for people in every age group and of every colour, creed and class throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? That is our challenge, and we must be determined to meet it.

2.8 pm

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Today’s debate marks the UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. “Elimination” is an ambitious word, but what we have heard today makes it very clear that we need to be ambitious and determined if we are to tackle the epidemic of violence against women that is blighting so many lives.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on leading the debate so comprehensively, and commend the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for the ongoing work of her Committee to promote and advance progress in this area.

We have heard from many speakers the recognition that violence against women is a global human rights abuse, but it is a pervasive and systemic human rights abuse and it affects women in all our communities and all over our world. It is rooted in, and compounded by, gender inequality; Scottish Women's Aid is fond of saying it is a cause and a consequence of violence against women.

We have heard today that one in three women will experience domestic abuse or sexual violence in their lifetime, but that is probably a conservative estimate. I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson) for her enormous courage in talking openly about things that have been so unspeakable for so long. Breaking the silence—as she and other Members today, including the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), have done—is incredibly powerful. I hope their frankness, wisdom and strength will help other women—women who are recovering from sexual violence, women who at the moment do not know whether their lives will get back on track or ever be the same again. I hope what we have heard today helps women to go forward with strength, and makes the future different for the next generation of women.

Members have made reference today to the fact that this morning I published my private Member’s Bill that would require the Government to set out a timetable to ratify the Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, better known as the Istanbul convention.
It would also strengthen reporting requirements so that MPs would have better opportunities to scrutinise the implementation of the convention on an ongoing basis. I hope the Government will support my Bill and that Members will come to the debate a week on Friday, and push forward something all of us want to see happen.

The Istanbul convention has local, national and transnational dimensions and its implementation has the potential to make a real difference to women’s lives. Scottish Women Aid has described the Istanbul convention as “quite simply the best piece of international policy and practice for eliminating violence against women that exists, setting minimum standards for Government responses to victims and survivors of gender based violence...It is a blueprint for how we move from small change at the margins, services that are picking up too few people, too late, to a system that is designed to end domestic abuse and violence against women.”

The Istanbul convention offers a powerful vehicle for countries across Europe, and beyond, to prevent and combat violence against women. The UK has played a prominent role for many years in responding to the challenge, and was involved in the development of the convention and the negotiations surrounding it. However, although the UK signed the Istanbul convention back in June 2012, it is still to ratify the treaty. The Government have consistently said that they want to ratify and intend to do so, but we have reached a hiatus. The process has stalled and the Istanbul convention has now been languishing on the backburner for over four and a half years. My Bill is an attempt to shift the logjam and give the Government the impetus they need to take the final steps to bring the UK into compliance.

There are a number of areas in which the UK Government need to legislate to bring domestic legislation into compliance with article 44 of the treaty, and there is the need for legislative change or legislative consent in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but I hope the Government will use the opportunity of my private Member’s Bill to shift this logjam and ratify the convention while they have the opportunity to do so.

I want to join other Members in paying tribute to the IcChange campaign for its work. I have also been very grateful for the support from Members on both sides of this House and from every part of the UK for that process. Given all the comments today from Members—not least the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) saying, “Come on, we can do this; let’s just do it”—I hope we are now on a fast track to making this a reality.

I have been working with women’s organisations from across the UK in connection with my Bill. I was invited by Solace Women’s Aid to visit one of its refuges here in London, which I did yesterday. I met five women and eight children currently staying in the refuge and the staff who support them. There were many things to reflect on from my visit, including overwhelmingly how vulnerable some women are when they leave an abusive situation and how precarious their lives can be for some time afterwards.

My visit brought it home to me that the problems associated with the shortage of affordable housing—which is of course very acute in London, but is also a reality in all parts of the UK—are magnified and compounded for women trying to move on from refuge accommodation and make a fresh start. Women who have left home with their children in what they stand up in have a really hard road ahead. For their own safety, they often need to leave their own community, moving away from any support networks they have.

I met a wee boy in the refuge yesterday. He was nine years old and he bears the physical scars of his father’s violence; I do not think it is possible to know what invisible scars he may carry. However, he wanted to show me his Lego. He had built an aeroplane, which he was very pleased to tell me he had designed himself, but his masterpiece, which he was showing off with pride, was a house—a house made out of Lego. At present, his family is all sleeping in one room in a refuge, but he dreams of a home some day. Yet his mum told me how hard it was to find a house for her and her children, when she is still looking after a toddler and does not have a job. She also talked about experiencing racism in her search for housing and more generally, and this focused my mind on the fact that domestic violence is one of the major causes of homelessness right across the UK. In Scotland, domestic violence is the third most common reason for a homelessness application. Some 73% of applications are made by women, and more than a third of those are women with children.

This does make me wonder, too, how many women might stay in violent and dangerous situations because they have nowhere else to go and fear the consequences of uprooting their families, unsetting their children and taking them out of school. Women who do leave their home to escape violence find that they may have to move repeatedly before finding a stable home, with all the upheaval that entails, and there is no doubt in my mind that that inhibits women from seeking safety for themselves and their children.

Gender-based violence affects women of all social and economic backgrounds, all ages, all ethnicities and all religions, but we know that some women are at greater risk: poorer women, younger women, disabled women, and women from minorities. In this respect, we see gender inequality compounded by other forms of structural disadvantage, and I saw that at first hand yesterday.

Several Members have talked about the cultural and traditional aspects of violence against women. I have talked a lot about the Istanbul convention today and in recent weeks and it is a very powerful legal instrument, but it is also important to remember that we have work to do to bring about changes in attitudes and beliefs. The hon. Member for Feltham and Heston touched on this, as did the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) when she was highlighting traditional practices such as FGM at home and abroad.

I attended an inter-faith event held along the Corridor in the House of Lords earlier this week. Representatives of many of the major religions in the UK attended. It is important that we bring those dimensions into the debate, because culture is often held up as a justification for certain forms of gender-based violence, but cultures can, and do, change, and religious leaders have a special responsibility and opportunity to influence deep-seated attitudes, values and beliefs that are often foundational to people’s identities and the lives they go on to lead. So I was encouraged by meeting how people from several faith traditions who are taking these issues very seriously and working within their own faith communities to move things forward.
One of the things the women in the refuge said to me yesterday was that women need to help women. It is clear from looking around at the gender balance of those in the Chamber today that women take these issues very seriously. Our bodies are on the frontline; our psychological health and our very selves are often on the frontline in this battle. All of us are affected by gender-based violence, and some of us are affected in very personal ways, as we have heard today. Far too many of us continue to experience one form or another of gender-based violence.

Sexual violence is grounded in the abuse of power, yet each and every one of us in this place is incredibly powerful: we are women with a voice; we are women with a platform; we are people entrusted to speak on behalf of others. Surely our greatest testament would be for us to use that power to eradicate violence against women. I hope women right across this House—and men, too, who want to stand in solidarity with us—will join us in a fight to make these statements not just words, so that when we talk about the elimination of violence against women, we mean it, and we end it once and for all.

2.19 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I should like to start by congratulating the right hon. and hon. Members who secured this Back-Bench debate. It has been a phenomenal debate, and I want to echo the message from my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) that this is a cross-party issue and that we can eliminate violence against women only if we work collaboratively. What we have heard in the Chamber today has shown that that is indeed a possibility, given the conviction that we all have on this issue. My hon. Friend went on to contextualise why the debate is so important, with 3 million women a year in the UK experiencing violence. That is 27.1% of us, or almost a third. I echo the comments from other Members that that is probably an underestimate. She also rightly focused on the impact of violence against women and the ripples of horror that go out from it. She focused particularly on the impact on children and the lack of support for them, as well as the impact on the whole community. She also spoke about the lack of mental health care for those affected. My right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) also spoke about that.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) spoke powerfully about the horrifying increase in online abuse and gave clear recommendations on what needs to be done. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke also spoke about the sexual harassment of girls, and I would like to acknowledge that the work done on this by the Women and Equalities Committee has been fantastic. I hope that we get an equally strong response on this from the Government.

I am pausing before saying this, because I do not think that anyone in the Chamber will forget the speech made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson). She spoke of “feeling surprise, then fear, then horror”. Those words described her feelings as a 14-year-old girl. We all felt that horror, and we are all sorry for her and for every other girl who experiences it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley ( Jess Phillips) spoke of the shame that we should feel for allowing this to happen. She urged the Government, as so many have, to introduce proper sex and relationships education so that all children can understand that no means no, understand how to respect themselves and others and understand the difference between right and wrong.

I want to pick up on one word that my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) used repeatedly in her speech. That word was “lucky”. She said she was lucky because she was only violently assaulted by a man. When we look at the scale of abuse, at the number of murders, which she also mentioned, and at the number of times a woman will endure domestic abuse before she reports it, perhaps she was lucky. I feel lucky that she is here in this Chamber to share her story with us and to campaign to prevent that from happening to other women.

I was pleased that the hon. Members for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) picked up on how victims were often the ones who had to change their lives, move house or change their name as a result of violence. Why do the victims of this crime, and this crime alone, have to suffer this perpetual assault and live in fear, possibly for the rest of their lives? We have to do something to address that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made an interesting speech about working with companies to help them to recognise the signs of domestic violence and to help them to intervene to prevent it. He also mentioned the international aspect of the problem, telling us that one in three women suffered violence and that one in four women suffered domestic violence in the UK. He gave us in the Chamber a duty to challenge and address that issue.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) talked about her Bill, which will be debated in the Chamber next Friday, and I hope that we will all support it. It demands that the Government produce a timetable for ratifying the Istanbul convention. That convention is a historic international treaty that sets legally binding standards for preventing and tackling domestic abuse. Crucially, the convention gives all survivors of domestic abuse the right to access the specialist services they need to enable them to live in safety and rebuild their lives. I hope I am not being uncharitable in wondering whether that is the block that is preventing the Government from signing the convention. I hope that they will do the right thing next Friday and give a guaranteed timetable for the ratification of the convention.
The Government should, however, be commended for doing a lot of work to prevent violence against women and girls, and I am grateful to the hon. Members for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) and for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) for drawing that work to the attention of the House. A lot of work has been done on modern slavery, and a stalking Bill has been introduced. Similarly, national and international work has been done on preventing violence against women and girls and on preventing FGM.

However, we know that domestic violence and violence against women and girls remain at pandemic levels the world over. Levels of domestic violence and violence against women in the UK have increased rapidly between 2009 and 2014, pushing up the overall levels of violent crime in the UK. Yes, a number of Members mentioned the contradictory official view that the Office for National Statistics crime statistics suggest that violent crime in England and Wales is continuing to fall, but we know from research carried out by Professor Sylvia Walby that that is because the ONS caps the number of crimes committed against an individual at five incidents per victim, even when many more offences have been recorded. When the cap is removed and the raw data are examined, the number of violent crimes increases by 60%. That increase is predominantly concentrated in violent crimes against women perpetrated by their partners and acquaintances.

As my hon. Friends have stated today, domestic violence has a higher rate of repeat victimisation than any other crime. On average, a woman will endure 35 attacks before calling the police. So, looking at the ONS data, we can deduce that 30 of those attacks will go unrecorded. I am grateful that the ONS has now agreed to stop that arbitrary capping of repeat incidents at five, and I therefore expect the next crime stats to give a much more accurate picture of the scale of violence against women and girls. Unless we have reliable data, the Government and local authorities simply cannot plan and resource the correct response. It is impossible to prioritise women’s services if they are unaware of the extent of the need. How can the Government resource the police correctly, for example, when they have no idea of what support is needed? As we have heard today, local authorities and domestic violence refuges are struggling to cope with the number of victims seeking help, and many are in crisis. When the Government have evidence of the true scale of the need, will they look to provide more specialist resources to local authorities and more resources directly to specialist services?

The Government’s national statement of expectations gives guidance on what local authorities should be providing for victims of domestic and sexual violence, but guidance alone does not ensure that every woman in need can access services. The statement says that service commissioners must have sufficient specialist support provision, including specialist BME refuges, but local authorities are facing unprecedented budget cuts, forcing commissioners to value cost per bed over quality of service. Specialist services are closing as a result. So where can a woman and her children sleep on the night she leaves her violent partner if there is no refuge for her to go to? How can she rebuild her life if there are no specialist staff to counsel her and her children or support her to find a new home? The responsibility for the delivery of domestic violence services cannot simply be devolved to local authorities in a haphazard and piecemeal way. Under the current system, the Government have no way of knowing whether provision for women is adequate or targeted at the right areas. Will the Minister commit today to mapping out the existing domestic violence and sexual violence provision across the country and to correlate it with a needs assessment? Will she recognise that the sheer scale of domestic violence requires a strategic central Government response, not simply a set of expectations for local authorities? Will the Government live up to the provisions in the Istanbul convention by ratifying it so that every survivor of domestic abuse has the right to access specialist services?

I remain absolutely committed to championing the cause of prevention. Violence against women and girls is not, and never will be, inevitable. Prevention is essential if we are ever to ensure that women and girls can live free from fear and be able to determine their own life. Yet we are seeing an ever-increasing normalisation of violence, staring out of advertising boards, computer screens and the mobile phones of little girls and boys. Through exposure to online pornography from an increasingly young age and messages conveyed in the media, children are growing up believing that violence and non-consensual sex in relationships is not just normal, but to be expected. At the same time, children are being pressured by adults and other children to engage in harmful sexual behaviour, such as sharing indecent images. Children are entering adulthood unable to recognise exploitative, abusive and manipulative behaviours. Teenage girls in my constituency tell me that they expect to be abused by their boyfriends because that is what being a girlfriend is about. The Government can no longer stand by and allow that. Will the Government introduce statutory, age-appropriate sex and relationships education in schools to give children the knowledge, resilience and confidence they need to recognise abusive or coercive behaviour and to challenge or contextualise the messages about sex and relationships they receive from the media?

Violence is perpetrated against women because they are women. Women are murdered by their boyfriends, husbands, sons, fathers and uncles in the UK and around the world, because those men believe that women are to be controlled and owned. Girls’ genitals are mutilated, because it is believed that a women’s sexuality belongs to her husband. Girls are denied education and forced into marriage, because girls’ lives are valued less than boys’. They are afraid to leave the house, see their family or love their children, because they exist to please men. Women are murdered and tortured and abused at the hands of men, because this violence is structural and used to maintain male power and control. Until that is accepted across societies, Governments and institutions, we will never truly eradicate it. Until violence against women and girls is accepted as structural violence, perpetrators will still be allowed to cross-examine their victims in court, a little girl will continue to be told that he is groping her because he likes her, and girls will continue to grow up thinking that violence and manipulation are all part of being a woman. Ending violence against women and girls requires a radical, systematic societal shift in power and attitudes. It is the role of every Member of this House to live up to that.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): Today is a really important day that marks one of the UN’s 16 days of action to eliminate violence against women and girls. This vital debate has shown our utter and united determination across the House to end these terrible crimes. I want to start by paying heartfelt thanks to the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson). To hear her talking about her rape when she was 14 years old, breaking the taboo by talking about it in this place, was truly remarkable. It was incredibly brave of her to talk, as she so eloquently did, about what happened to her. I am sure that her mother would be incredibly proud of her, because she will be helping so many women who are suffering in silence. If after listening to her just one woman picks up the phone and gets the support that is available, the hon. Lady will have saved someone’s life. I am sure that many women will draw courage and inspiration from her today.

I also thank the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) who bravely talked about a serious sexual assault. She made a powerful speech, highlighting what she says are widespread attitudes towards and abuse of women in the industry in which she served. I give every power to her elbow and give her every encouragement to carry on talking about this to help women in that industry today not to have to suffer in the way that she did.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), who also gave a moving, powerful speech about her dreadful personal experience of being a victim of stalking. I commend her for using that experience to campaign strongly since she became a Member. She played such an important part in bringing in the anti-stalking measures that were announced yesterday.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for securing this debate and for the approach she took in her speech. I also thank my friend the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), with whom we work so closely. She is right that it is absolutely essential that work must be cross-party and done across the House. There is simply no room for politics in this. We must keep the issue at the top of the political agenda by working together to get the cultural changes that we all want.

I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for reminding the House of the Prime Minister’s strong, persistent leadership on keeping women and girls safe at home and around the world. The Government appreciate the valuable work done by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke and the Women and Equality Committee, not least the report that we have discussed today.

Our goal remains simple: no woman should live in fear of abuse, and every girl should grow up knowing that she is safe. As we have heard today, violence and abuse can affect anyone, and while we do think that the prevalence of violence against women is going down, we are working to ensure that we have the right data. We published more data just yesterday to help us be sure about that, but we have a long way to go to reach our goal. We have encouraged women who are suffering to come forward and that more prosecutions and convictions are being secured, we are absolutely not complacent.

Since 2010, we have done more than ever before to tackle violence against women and girls. In March, we launched the new violence against women and girls strategy and pledged over £80 million of funding to support that in the UK. We have strengthened the law and provided agencies with the tools they need to support victims, bring perpetrators to justice and prevent such crimes from happening in the first place. We have introduced new offences of coercive and controlling behaviour, stalking, forced marriage and FGM, and have banned revenge porn. On top of that good work, I am delighted that we announced yesterday some important new measures to tackle gender-based violence.

As we have heard, stalking is a devastating crime and can have serious consequences. Yesterday, we committed to introduce new civil stalking protection orders to protect victims and stop perpetrators at the earliest opportunity, before their behaviour becomes entrenched. We also launched a £15 million, three-year VAWG transformation fund to aid, promote and embed the best local practice that exists today and to ensure that early intervention and prevention become the norm, so that we can stop the awful gaps in services about which we heard today. Although we have a national framework and strategy, it is vital that local areas take ownership and responsibility for the services in those areas, and that they put the victim at the centre of their approach to providing services, working together to incorporate the needs of a wide range of people. To help areas to do that, we published our national statement of expectations, on which we worked in partnership with a great many civil society organisations and the Local Government Association, to ensure that commissioning is the best it can be. We want good examples from across the country to be available to every community and every woman.

Included in the data we published yesterday was the domestic homicide review, which for the first time considered all the learning from examples of when things have gone badly wrong and individuals did not get access to services, and of when the statutory sector did not do everything possible to keep women safe, including the worst outcome of that leading to a death. By publishing this review and a series of recommendations, we will be able to make real progress. Included alongside that was better training for the chairs of domestic homicide reviews and funding to enable this work to carry on.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: I am not going to give way, as I want to cover all the questions put to me.

Our new £15 million VAWG service transformation fund is just one part of the £80 million package that I talked about. This is the most central funding that any Government have put into tackling these terrible crimes, and it includes provision for rape support centres, national helplines and refuges. I am sure that our actions are breaking up our strong link, and if more resources are needed, we will always keep that under review.

The police transformation fund has also funded programmes that support our work to end VAWG, and other sources of funding are available across the country, at the local and national level. These sources include money from the troubled families programme; for victims’ services; for dedicated mental health provision; for the tackling modern slavery programmes; and £15 million
from the tampon tax fund. I am particularly pleased that this year that fund recognised the incredibly important role that grassroots organisations play in addressing VAWG and they have a particular spot in the fund.

I was asked some very direct questions and I wish to answer them directly today; the red folder is on the Bench. First, let me say that abusive behaviour online is treated the same as such behaviour offline. The same prevention orders and the same tools to prosecute offenders for that behaviour online should be pursued. So please, Members, go out into your communities and spread the word that we must get law enforcement agencies to use those new powers.

Mrs Miller: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: I am sorry, but I do not really have enough time to do so.

Secondly, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) said that we must do more to educate children about healthy relationships, including sexual relationships, and that no must mean no in every circumstance. I think we all agree with that, and there is a huge amount of determination and ongoing work to deliver that. She is absolutely right to say that we all need to talk about this. As a mother of three children, I can say that it can be a bit embarrassing, not least for my children, having to sit down to talk about this; my son has just about recovered from having to talk to his mum about online porn. But it is essential that we all do this, and there is a lot of very good material to support us as citizens, as parents, as teachers and as youth workers to have those conversations. We are absolutely determined to make sure we work with partners such as the PSHE Association, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, and the range of excellent charities that do so much in this space, to make sure we have highly effective communications to really educate young boys and girls about good, healthy and safe relationships.

I was also asked to respond to the femicide report, and I will be writing to the Members who raised that, and there is a lot of very good material to support us as citizens, as parents, as teachers and as youth workers to have those conversations. We are absolutely determined to make sure we work with partners such as the PSHE Association, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, and the range of excellent charities that do so much in this space, to make sure we have highly effective communications to really educate young boys and girls about good, healthy and safe relationships.

We have also heard harrowing stories today about FGM and its continued prevalence. I just want to confirm to everyone the utter determination of the Prime Minister and of the Home Secretary, who has made this a personal challenge, to do everything we can to stamp out this vile and unacceptable practice in our country and all around the world.

Finally, there has been much talk about the ratification of the Istanbul convention today. I am proud that we signed that convention and I know that we will ratify it. I want to assure Members that the lack of ratification is not stopping us doing anything; we are already complying with every single aspect of that convention. We exceed most of its criteria, with the exception being the criterion relating to extra-territorial powers. Detailed and ongoing discussions are taking place between the Ministry of Justice and the devolved Administrations, particularly Northern Ireland’s, to get this right. We will not have time to go into all those details today, but we will be able to talk about this at length next Friday, and I looking forward to that debate.

In concluding, I wish to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), the hon. Members for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and for Birmingham, Yardley, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), and the hon. Members for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) for their powerful and insightful speeches today. This has been one of the finest debates I have had the pleasure of sitting through in this Chamber. I also want to underline, especially to the people outside the Chamber today, that I am sure that together we will be redoubling our efforts across Parliament and across civil society, through business and in conjunction with international partners, so that when we meet again next year, we will have many more victories to celebrate and fewer failures to talk about.

Violence against women and girls simply has no place in a modern world. It harms individuals, families, communities, societies and the global economy. Through our determined effort, I am sure that we can make this history. It is important that we do this, not only because it is the right thing to do and because it is vital for women and girls, but because all humanity will reap the benefits.

2.46 pm

Seema Malhotra: Let me start by thanking the Minister and the shadow Minister for their helpful and valuable contributions at the end of this debate. I also wish to thank all the other Members who have taken part, making particular mention of my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), and the hon. Members for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) and for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson). Let me echo the Minister’s words by saying to the hon. Member for Edinburgh West that her mum would have been incredibly proud of her, and I am sure that her family are, as we all are. In her speech—the same could be said of those others—she put others first, ahead of herself. I thank her for doing that, as it will make a big difference to my constituents, too.

I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for its support and for allowing us to have this debate today. We have heard a range of contributions highlighting the heartening progress in some areas but the rolling back of the clock in others, with the description of the situation in Sierra Leone being an example of that. I thank the Minister for her comments on the questions that were raised, but it will not surprise her when I say that we were disappointed not to hear a commitment to compulsory relationship and sex education in schools, particularly given the urgency of that. I am sure this will not be the end of that debate. There was also a recognition of the need to ratify the Istanbul convention. We need the Government to lay out a timetable, one that we believe and know will be stuck to.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the UN’s International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence; further notes that violence...
against women is a human rights violation and prevents women and girls fulfilling their full potential; recognises that an estimated one in three women experience physical or sexual violence worldwide, but that violence against women and girls is not inevitable, and that prevention is possible and essential; and calls on the Government to work with other governments around the world to adopt comprehensive laws addressing violence against women and gender-based inequality and discrimination, to provide women-centred, specialist services to all survivors, and to fund key education and prevention programmes so that violence against women and girls is ended once and for all.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the Cancer Strategy one year on.

In moving this motion, which stands in my name and that of the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), I wish to recognise all those in the cancer community for all their work, day in, day out, fighting this disease, and the huge number of Members of this House who, through a wide range of cancer-related all-party groups, carry out work in this very important area.

The hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay, who is chairman of the all-party group on cancer, is unable to be here today, but he wanted me to say how much he appreciates the Backbench Business Committee’s granting this debate. As Members may know, the hon. Gentleman’s wife is undergoing treatment, and I am sure that everyone in the House would want to send their best wishes to him and his family at this difficult time.

It is estimated that there are more than 2.4 million people living with cancer in the UK, and that number continues to grow. Cancer is becoming more complex, with many more treatments available. Many patients are living with co-morbidities and with the consequences of a cancer diagnosis many years after treatment has finished.

The all-party group on cancer has a proud record of successfully campaigning on a number of issues. Just two days ago, we held our annual Britain against Cancer conference in Central Hall—it is one of the largest cancer conferences in the UK. On behalf of the group, I wish to pass on thanks to all the contributors, including the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), and the shadow Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), for their contributions. Delegates very much appreciated everybody’s input.

The last two years have seen significant developments in cancer policy. In July 2015, the independent cancer taskforce published the England cancer strategy. Since we last debated this issue in November last year, NHS England has published its England cancer strategy implementation plan, setting out how it will roll out the 96 recommendations.

More recently, we have seen the publication of the National Cancer Transformation Board’s progress report, outlining what steps NHS England has taken over the past year in implementing these recommendations across the country. Only last Friday, the Office for National Statistics published the latest one-year cancer survival rate figures for those patients diagnosed in 2014 and followed up to 2015. As NHS England chief executive Simon Stevens pointed out at the Britain against Cancer conference, that showed the dramatic improvement in patient outcomes that has been achieved over the past 20 years. That is something to be celebrated, but there is still much more to do.

The all-party group has been active in monitoring progress on the England cancer strategy, holding a short inquiry early in the year to assess progress. We concluded that positive progress is being made, but that there is still much more to do to realise the ambition of
the England cancer strategy. Having taken evidence from a wide range of people, we made a number of recommendations, which I will use to highlight some of the key themes that emerged from the inquiry.

The first key recommendation focused on the need for greater clarity on funding for all the 96 recommendations of the England cancer strategy. It was positive, therefore, to see more detail in the National Cancer Transformation Board’s progress report, which set out the funding available per year for the next four years. I very much welcome the announcement by Simon Stevens at our Britain against Cancer conference that Cancer Alliances will be able to bid for £200 million of funding to invest in early diagnosis, care for people living with cancer, and cancer after treatment. That is very good news, and I look forward to getting further clarity on how the full funding package, set out in the progress report, will be allocated across the cancer strategy’s recommendations.

This is particularly important given the lack of clarity around cancer funding to date. The estimates for the total amount spent on cancer care in the NHS per newly diagnosed patient have not been published beyond 2012-13, which has been described as a significant data gap when it comes to evaluating the cost and efficiency of cancer care. Will the Minister today commit to publish an update on those figures in the House of Commons Library at the earliest opportunity?

Alongside funding, another recommendation and concern that was raised by stakeholders in our inquiry was around the need for further transparency on how the cancer strategy is being delivered, what the priorities are, and who is responsible for delivering key recommendations. Again, the progress report from the National Cancer Transformation Board went some way to address that concern. However, further detail around how the strategy is being delivered, particularly the membership and terms of reference for the six oversight groups tasked with overseeing delivery, is vital to ensure that the wider cancer community is properly engaged.

We also heard from many organisations that were unclear on how the delivery of recommendations will be monitored at a local level.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): One of the things that shocked me in a debate on ovarian cancer was to find that there are parts of the country where CA125 is not routinely available to women who are suspected of having ovarian cancer. I have also had letters from a number of constituents who say that they are unable to get access to bisphosphonates, a drug that helps to prevent breast cancer. Did the all-party group come up with recommendations to try to ensure that wherever people live, they get the best possible cancer prevention and care? At present there clearly is not universal provision of these important diagnostic tests and drugs.

Nic Dakin: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about equal access across the country. We are all concerned about that and focused on it.

It is positive news that the 16 cancer alliances have been established and that NHS England will publish further guidance for alliances to help them develop their plans to deliver the cancer strategy locally, but if they are to monitor the delivery of the strategy, it is vital that they are given the right resource to do so effectively.

A particular issue which was raised in relation to both transparency and accountability was workforce. Most people, I believe, will agree with me when I say that our NHS workforce is under great strain. The cancer workforce is experiencing significant gaps in key areas, including radiography and clinical nurse specialists. For example, Anthony Nolan highlights the fact that access to post-transplant clinical nurse specialists is inconsistent across the country. At the same time, demand is growing, and cancer is becoming more complex, as patients often have multiple co-morbidities. Unless they are addressed, these workforce pressures will undoubtedly have a severe effect on cancer services.

Another area of growing need for cancer patients is access to timely and appropriate mental health support which, if achieved, can reduce pressures on other parts of the health service.

The all-party group welcomes the recommendation in the strategy that Health Education England would deliver a strategic review of the cancer workforce by March 2017, and we were grateful to Professor Ian Cumming for meeting us earlier this year. However, we have strong concerns about progress on this crucial piece of work. Although we are aware that a baseline report of the current cancer workforce has been produced, it has not been published, and there is currently little detail on how Health Education England is planning to conduct the strategic review. We are not aware of any plans from HEE to engage with the sector on the strategic review. We are concerned by the lack of transparency and involvement of the wider sector. We were pleased to see a reference to the strategic review of workforce in the Department of Health’s mandate to HEE. Will the Minister outline how he is holding HEE to account on that recommendation?

Diagnosing cancer earlier improves survival rates, and the all-party group believes that focusing on outcome indicators such as the one-year survival rate is crucial to driving progress in this area. The inclusion of the one-year cancer survival indicator in the clinical commissioning group improvement and assessment framework—formerly the delivery dashboard—is very much welcomed by the all-party group, which has long campaigned for that. Since then, the all-party group has continued to champion this cause, and earlier this year at our annual summer reception we were the first to congratulate and recognise clinical commissioning groups that had improved their one-year cancer survival figures.

So it was music to our ears to hear Simon Stevens at this week’s Britain against Cancer conference further commit NHS England to increasing its efforts on diagnosing cancer early. Last week the latest one-year cancer survival rates were published, and we were pleased to see an improvement, with the average one-year cancer survival rate in England standing at 70.4%. However, incremental improvements are not enough to match our neighbours in Europe and across the world, as our figures are below the standard set in countries such as Sweden, which has a one-year survival rate of 82%.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on pancreatic cancer, I am acutely aware of the difficulty of diagnosing some cancers early. My constituent Maggie Watts lost her healthcare locally, but if they are to monitor the delivery of the strategy, it is vital that they are given the right resource to do so effectively.

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over those 40 years. Some 74% of patients across the UK cannot name a single symptom of pancreatic cancer, so there is a need for further cancer awareness campaigns to improve the outcomes for these “stuck” cancers, as well as further research into better diagnostic tools in these areas.

Be Clear on Cancer campaigns have been very effective but, as Bloodwise points out, we need further thought on how the NHS can work closely with cancer charities and patient organisations to increase awareness of cancers with non-specific symptoms, such as blood cancers.

I recently met representatives of the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation, who were clear that early diagnosis of lung cancer dramatically improves patient outcomes for this, the biggest cancer killer. In some countries, screening for lung cancer is being introduced, with positive outcomes. Should we actively consider that here?

It is worth pausing to recognise the excellent work that public health campaigns have played in fighting cancer. Since the smoking ban was introduced nearly 10 years ago, the number of adult smokers in the UK has dropped by 1 million. Smoking cessation is still the most effective cancer preventive strategy, and all of us need to ensure that, when local government budgets are under pressure, that does not lead to reductions in public health budgets for short-term fiscal gain, with long-term negative health consequences and associated costs. As Cancer Research has made clear, the Government must publish the tobacco control strategy without delay.

The final recommendation I want to highlight from our inquiry is on a similar theme: the involvement of patients and organisations in the cancer community in the implementation of the cancer strategy across England. This recommendation has been supported by other groups, such as the Cancer Campaigning Group, which noted in its recent report that the National Cancer Transformation Board and the Independent National Cancer Advisory Group should collaborate with organisations with an expertise in cancer and involve patients in delivery.

The issue is particularly pertinent to people with rarer or less common cancers, many of which are childhood and teenage cancers. The all-party group was concerned when the cancer transformation board’s implementation plan did not highlight rarer cancers specifically. Rarer cancers—particularly those with vague symptoms—tend to be diagnosed later than most common cancers, with many diagnosed through emergency presentation. That not only impacts on survival but leads to poor patient experience. In addition, many patients with rarer cancers, and particularly those with blood cancers, can live with their conditions for many years, and it is vital that provision to support people living with and beyond cancer, such as the Recovery Package, consider the needs of these patients. While many of the recommendations in the cancer strategy will go some way to address that issue, it is vital that NHS England retain a strong focus on this group. What discussions has the Minister had with NHS England about how it is ensuring that organisations across the cancer community are involved in the delivery of the cancer strategy?

Currently, cancer medicines, including those for rare cancers, are appraised by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence on a timetable designed to ensure that a recommendation can be issued at the time of licence. However, there is growing recognition in the cancer community that current NICE methodology and process are not suitable for assessing treatments for rarer cancers, and that the one-size-fits-all model adopted by NICE could result in patients with rarer cancers losing out on access to treatments that patients in other developed countries are able to access.

There is an ongoing joint consultation by NICE and NHS England, which incorporates changes to highly specialised technology appraisal thresholds, introduces an affordability assessment and creates a fast-track route for highly cost-effective drugs. However, the consultation does not address or acknowledge any specific recommendations for the assessment of treatments for rarer cancers. Concern has been raised by the cancer community that this makes these available treatments vulnerable to always falling through the net. What is the plan to ensure that the NICE process and methodology applied to rarer cancers incorporate the limited patient numbers and data collection, rather than applying the same process irrespective of the rarity of the cancer? What additional flexibility will be applied to NICE criteria when assessing rarer cancers to account for inevitable uncertainties in clinical data?

In summary, it is important to recognise the progress that is being made in implementing the cancer strategy one year on, but there is much more to do. Together, properly supported by Government, those in the cancer community are willing and eager to deliver the better outcomes that would mean we were not just closing the gap on better-performing nations but beginning to lead the way.

3.4 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me early in this debate. May I express my sincere thanks to the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), and to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron)? Of course, I join the whole House in sending our best wishes to my hon. Friend’s wife at a very difficult time. I also pay tribute to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this vital debate about the cancer strategy which was published almost 18 months ago in July last year.

I am going to confine my remarks to the issue of blood cancers, and hope to be concise. There are 137 different types of blood cancer, although many of them are not well understood by the general public, and awareness is relatively low. In fact, blood cancers are the fifth most common type of cancer that people are diagnosed with in this country, and, sadly, the third biggest killer. It therefore deserves much greater awareness and understanding, and further efforts by the Department of Health and the national health service to ensure that patients who are diagnosed and their families are properly supported. I thank the hon. Member for Scunthorpe for raising that issue.

I was initially very unaware of the issue of blood cancer; my knowledge was relatively vague. That was until midway through 2012, when after only a few weeks of being ill with flu-like symptoms, my mother was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia, and within 24 hours of diagnosis unfortunately passed away. Sadly, this experience has been revisited in my office. One of my employees, Tom, who also works for my hon. Friend
the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), found out only weeks ago that his mother has unfortunately been diagnosed with leukaemia. I know that the House will join me in sending our best wishes to her and to her family.

The issue of blood cancers often comes thundering into people’s lives unexpectedly, because it does not, perhaps, have the same profile as solid tumour cancers. Indeed, I mentioned my mother’s experience of being ill for a short time and being diagnosed very late. Unfortunately, the national cancer patient experience survey has shown that a third of those who are diagnosed with blood cancers have gone to see their GP twice before they finally get that diagnosis, again because of the lack of awareness.

In relation to our efforts here in Parliament, I am pleased that just before the summer recess I was able, with the help of other right hon. and hon. Members, to establish the all-party parliamentary group on blood cancer. I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in his place—he is a very key member of that group—as we seek to raise awareness of this issue. I would like to put on the record my sincere thanks to the Speaker for allowing Bloodwise, the cancer charity that is the secretariat to the all-party group, to hold an awareness event in his apartments in September.

The Minister is very diligent and works very hard, and in the short time he has held his well-deserved position he has been very kind and generous to me when responding to health concerns. I would be grateful if the issue of blood cancers was specifically addressed, so that the patient pathway and patient experience can be improved with regard to general awareness, diagnosis and the treatment and care provided by our national health service.

3.10 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), who has made a very strong case on blood cancers. I am sure that the Minister was listening and I suspect that he will respond positively.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) on opening the debate. I also congratulate him and his colleague on the all-party parliamentary group on cancer, the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), on securing it. I echo the hon. Member for Crawley in wishing the hon. Gentleman’s wife and family well in the treatment that they are undertaking.

I had not intended to speak in this debate, but I have received briefings from Action on Smoking and Health and from Cancer Research UK, as well as a copy of the British Lung Foundation’s expert working group report on lung cancer, and I thought that it would be appropriate to reinforce some of the points that they make. I checked that there was no massive pressure on time and that I would be able to make those points were I to catch your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I am grateful to you for calling me.

I thank Deborah Arnott from ASH and Lucy Absolom for their briefings, which I found very helpful. I should point out that I have had warts, basal cell carcinomas removed from my face. Fortunately, the biopsy on all of them found that they were benign. But my consultant dermatologist has recommended that I wear a hat to protect my Scottish features from the southern sun and the ultraviolet rays, which are even more worrying. Being married to a doctor, I always take very careful notice of any clinical advice that I am given, to avoid the risk of being criticised for not listening to those who are more intelligent and better qualified than me. I thank the good doctors at the Aberfeldy health centre and the dermatology department of the Royal London hospital for their assistance in protecting me.

I will start with the bad news. All three of the briefings that I have received have many positive things to say about the Government’s cancer strategy. I also think that, on the whole, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe was positive in his opening remarks. There are clearly some questions to be asked, and I will do so, but the briefings are more supportive than critical of what the Government and the clinicians of NHS England are trying to achieve.

The ASH briefing begins:

“The UK’s Cancer Strategy...for England 2015-2020 recommends the publication of a new Tobacco Control Plan within 12 months as a key element of its first strategic priority, a radical upgrade in prevention and public health. If this target had been met a new Plan would have been published in July 2016. However six months on, and a year since the last Tobacco Control Plan expired, there is still no new Plan.”

That is a major criticism in the briefings. ASH goes on to say:

“The previous Tobacco Control Plan achieved its ambitions to reduce smoking rates: adults fell from 21.2% to below 18.5%, 15 year olds from 15% to below 12% and among pregnant women from 14% to 11% or less. The Government must publish a new plan to build on this progress.”

I apologise to the Minister if the plan has been published, but my hon. Friend clearly suggested that it has not, so when will it be published? We would be grateful if the Minister gave us any encouragement that it is due sometime soon. The data show how successful the previous plan was at cutting the number of smokers and, consequently, reducing the exposure of non-smokers, especially children, to second-hand smoke.

I should own up to being an ex-smoker. I started in my early teens, and I gave up at 21.35 hours on 4 November 1980. The fact that I remember the minute does not indicate that I miss it at all. I remember it because it was during a “Panorama” programme that highlighted the legs of a chap who was, it became apparent later, in a wheelchair. The poor gentleman had suffered thrombosis in both legs and had had amputations on both legs. The camera eventually got to his face, and we could see that he was still smoking cigarettes. My then wife was pregnant at the time, and giving up smoking seemed a very sensible thing to do. I had tried to do so 18 months previously, when I gave up for six months. However, I burned my hand badly in a fire, and the first thing I asked as I was being taken to hospital—after six months off cigarettes—was, “Will somebody give me a cigarette?” It took me 18 months to get back off them, but I managed to quit.

When I joined the London fire brigade, two thirds of firemen—as it was in those days—smoked. This is only anecdotal, but 23 years later two thirds of fire fighters now do not smoke. That demonstrates the change in attitudes to health and fitness within the service, and it reflects a similar change in attitudes in society towards smoking. All the positive policies that have been introduced,
such as no smoking in public buildings, demonstrate that we live in a society that is completely different from 30 or 40 years ago.

On a new plan for tobacco control, which we hope will be published shortly, I would be grateful if the Minister shared his thoughts ahead of publication on what targets we might expect from 2020 onwards for reducing adult smoking numbers, what budget might be set aside for mass media campaigns and what support might be available for stop-smoking services. Those services reduce health inequalities, because most of the people who access them are from more deprived communities. That will help many of my constituents, appropriately. The last plan clearly worked, and we need a new one.

Cancer Research UK’s briefing states:

“If the strategy is implemented in full then it is estimated that 30,000 more lives could be saved by 2020. 11,000 of those lives will be saved through improvements to early diagnosis.”

That is one of the strong points that my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe made. Cancer Research UK stated that it had not seen the progress needed on the plan. On prevention, it states:

“4 in 10 cancers are preventable. We need a radical upgrade in prevention to ensure the future sustainability of the NHS and reduce cancer incidence.”

Cancer Research UK wants the Government to publish the tobacco control strategy without further delay, as does ASH, and it wants the Government to extend existing junk food TV marketing restrictions to the 9 pm watershed to reduce children’s exposure to marketing by more than half. The briefing states that “urgent action needs to be taken to ensure the NHS cancer strategy without further delay, as the briefing states:

“Replacing the machines will mean that more patients can access the innovative radiotherapy which plays a vital role in curing cancer, slowing the growth of tumours and improving quality of life for cancer patients.”

As I said at the beginning, not only are not all the comments from respected organisations critical of the Government’s policy, but they are actually complimentary about their policy and approach, apart from the absence of a tobacco control plan. That key absence has been highlighted by all the charities and research organisations concerned. I want to reinforce the point to the Minister that there have been lots of positive comments, because this is not just the Opposition being critical of the Government. There are lots of great and positive stories, but there is that one absence.

As my hon. Friend said, and as I have said on behalf of Cancer Research UK and ASH, we want the Minister to answer a number of questions. If he is not in a position to do so today, it would be very welcome if he asked his officials to write to those of us involved in this debate in due course with additional information. I look forward to hearing the comments of the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), and of the Minister in response to this debate.

3.21 pm

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I am most grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate.

I listened with great interest to the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) talking about his experiences of smoking. I gave up smoking before a flight with a parliamentary delegation coming back from Bahrain nearly 15 years ago, and I have never looked back. One of the drivers that made me give up smoking was a conversation with the then Member for Manchester, Withington—I would call him an hon. Friend, but he was an Opposition Member—who is now Lord Bradley. Like the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, I remember smoking in the House. I remember lighting up in a Standing Committee and being reprimanded, but we could smoke in the Library Room C then. I offered the then Member for Manchester, Withington a cigarette in the Tea Room—we could smoke anywhere then, as well as in the Smoking Room—and he said, “David, no thanks. I’ve got an emphysema hospital in my constituency.” That really hit home.

The hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) is nodding. May I pay tribute to him? He was at the Britain against Cancer conference on Tuesday, which I attended as an officer of the all-party group on cancer. He has served on that group for much longer than I have, and he chaired the meeting in the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). Other hon. Members have paid tribute to my hon. Friend, and of course to his wife, who is undergoing treatment against Cancer conference on Tuesday, which I attended as an officer of the all-party group on cancer. He has served on that group for much longer than I have, and he chaired the meeting in the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). Other hon. Members have paid tribute to my hon. Friend, and of course to his wife, who is undergoing treatment.

As a politician, I often think that we should be able to sum up something, such as a very wordy report, in just a phrase or a sentence. That may be because of my background in advertising many years ago. Those dramatic results were clearly illustrated by Simons Stevens, when he said that in 1999, 60% of cancer patients survived, but in 2014, the figure was 70%. We went over some of those figures, which I thought were truly remarkable and really very encouraging.
I want to focus on something else that Simon Stevens said, which the hon. Member for Scunthorpe has mentioned. He announced £200 million of funding at the conference:

“The £200m fund has been set up to encourage local areas to find new and innovative ways to diagnose cancer earlier, improve the care for those living with cancer and ensure each cancer patient gets the right care for them.”

That includes aftercare treatment. What do we do when a patient has had chemotherapy and then there is nothing else—they have not been given any other options, so they feel depressed and unhappy?

That is where my main experience in this House comes in, as I have worked on integrated healthcare—holistic medicine, I suppose—with the all-party parliamentary group on integrated healthcare for nearly 30 years. I have been an officer of the group for nearly 25 years, and have chaired it for quite a while. It feels almost as if our time has come. It has now been clearly recognised that part of the cancer package should be a wide range of support. We can see that all over the country. I was at LOROS last week, which is where very ill people in Leicestershire go for their last few days. A range of different therapies were being offered there. That is happening not just in my constituency but in many others.

I return to the conference mentioned by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe—[ Interruption. ] I see he has now been promoted to the Front Bench. That is the great thing about the Opposition—the Front-Bench team changes so quickly that we can never be sure where any hon. Members are. I remember that when I was a young Member the advice I was given was always to sit in the same place in the House so that the Speaker knew where you were. In that case, it is a wonder that any Opposition Members get called at all, because they are always moving around the Benches. The hon. Member for Scunthorpe has clearly been promoted this afternoon, so congratulations.

One battle I have had over the years has been with the medical establishment about what should be included in treatments on the health service. It has been an ongoing battle against vested interests in the medical establishment who do not want to see money leaking from their own particular silos. That is down to scarce resources. One of the most interesting stalls at the Britain against Cancer conference on Tuesday was about cancer detection dogs. Even I gasped when I saw it—my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who has also had experience of cancer and has contributed so much in her short time in this House to addressing cancer problems, is nodding and smiling. Just as we have dogs in this House—I will not say when or where they go—to detect things that may have been placed here by people who do not particularly agree with what we do, so it is possible to use dogs to detect cancer. If that is possible, I suspect that the authorities in the health service have not run double-blind placebo-controlled trials to establish whether it works. It works on the basis of experience, because the dogs are trained to detect by smell when people have developed cancer.

On the great battleground with the orthodox proponents of orthodox medicine, the battle line has in recent years been drawn on something called evidence-based medicine. We are told that in the health service medicine should always be evidence-based, and nothing should be used unless it meets that criterion. I had a look at that, and got the Library to look the papers up. It goes back to 1992 and a statement by Professor Sackett that various other academics then ran with—there was a Professor Guyatt also. But when saying how important evidence-based medicine was, Professor Sackett also said:

“Good doctors use both individual clinical expertise and the best available external evidence, and neither alone is enough. Without clinical expertise, practice risks becoming tyrannized by external evidence, for even excellent external evidence may be inapplicable to or inappropriate for an individual patient. Without current best external evidence, practice risks becoming rapidly out of date, to the detriment of patients.”

It is hardly a secret that we were discussing Brexit in the House yesterday and that we have been very much involved in the whole debate since the summer—and for many of us, a long time before that. One problem in healthcare in relation to the EU has been the imposition of directives on the UK that have negatively impacted support services in healthcare. The traditional herbal medicines directive requires Chinese medical practitioners to show 30 years’ usage of a particular medicine in the UK, or 15 years under other circumstances, and bans a whole range of complex preparations freely available, and produced to very high standards in modern factories, in the People’s Republic of China.

Before I came to the Chamber this afternoon, I was at a Chinese medical clinic. I practise what I preach and have acupuncture once a month. I take Chinese herbal medicine and I think it has kept me away from antibiotics, steroids and other drugs for a good few years. I talked to practitioners about what they are able to do for cancer patients. There is a very long list of types of cancer that can be treated using traditional Chinese herbal medicine: cervical cancer, Non-Hodgkin lymphoma, HIV, colon cancer, head and neck cancer, breast cancer and prostate cancer. The list goes on.

I believe that several of my constituents are alive today because they have used Chinese medicine. It strengthens one’s immune system and is very effective after cancer treatment. It deals with particular symptoms. I asked the practitioner this afternoon what conditions she would expect to be able to alleviate using Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture. She said: tiredness, lack of energy, fevers, headaches, hypertension, dry skin, seizures and involuntary muscular twitching.

We have to broaden the scope of services available on the health service to help to meet patient demand. I hope the £200 million fund will mean a further widening of the scope of services available. My hon. Friend the Minister, who is new to his post, could do a lot worse than contact the head of the Professional Standards Authority, Harry Cayton. Harry Cayton’s organisation oversees the regulation of 23 different health organisations, including about 20,000 providers. If we go to the trouble of regulating different therapies, or having oversight of that regulation, why on earth do we not use it? What is the point of having a statutory regulator that checks the oversight when we do not actually use its services? That is a great mistake.

My hon. Friend the Minister could do a lot worse than go around the country and look at some of the practices that help cancer patients in remission. One of the best is the award-winning Velindre cancer centre in south Wales. Each year, it sees over 5,000 new referrals and about 50,000 new out-patient appointments. It
We have seen the pressure on institutions at Liverpool and elsewhere. What could be more stupid than to attack a medical system that is widely used in France, that voters went for in Switzerland, and that is used across the world, including in India and Brazil? What is the problem here?

I was in Toulouse to look at British Aerospace work recently, and I found a homeopathic chemist right in the middle of the main square there. Some 90% of pregnant women in France use homeopathy. The Minister must not be bludgeoned by the tiny number of people who use legal threats and resist it. Simon Stevens is now coming up with new money for aftercare for cancer, so we need to look out of the box and consider new possibilities. We are not even looking at some possibilities that are orthodox.

As I said, I am an officer of the cancer group, and I chaired a meeting the other day to hear anxious and anguished professors of medicine from this country talking about a new mainstream treatment called Target for breast cancer. Target is about putting a small device into the tumour and not all the other organs in the chest. The chemotherapy treats the tumour and not all the other organs in the chest.

Drugs can help patients stay away from antibiotics. I will do well to visit—it is a few stops on the District line from here, in Fulham—is the Breast Cancer Haven. It employs over 670 staff and has an annual budget of over £49 million. The money for that service, which is widely used by doctors, comes not from the Department but from charitable donations. At that centre, they use reflexology, reiki healing, which I have studied over the years, aromatherapy, and breathing and relaxation techniques, and they have spectacular results.

Another wonderful organisation of which my hon. Friend would do well to visit—it is a few stops on the District line from here, in Fulham—is the Breast Cancer Haven. It offers a range of therapies to combat stress, and I have attended its sessions. It is wonderful to see people suffering from breast and other cancers being given hope that chemotherapy is not the end of the road and that there is something out there to support them.

Another wonderful clinic that my hon. Friend would do well to visit—on homeopathy in the health service. Without looking at the benefits, they argue that it is a waste of money. We have seen the pressure on institutions at Liverpool and elsewhere. What could be more stupid than to attack a medical system that is widely used in France, that voters went for in Switzerland, and that is used across the world, including in India and Brazil? What is the problem here?

David Tredinnick: My hon. Friend makes her point very well. In his excellent presentation, Simon Stevens talked about bringing new equipment onstream for radiography, I believe. Yes, my hon. Friend was there, and she confirms this. I certainly agree with what she said, and we need to wake up to what is being invented in Britain and used across the world.

I shall conclude, in case anyone else is hoping to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to finish with a couple of other points. There are other treatments out there, to which people turn in desperation when they reach the end of their conventional treatments. One of them is called oxygen therapy, and broadly speaking it means getting more oxygen than is normally received, from a container. It is not a very expensive treatment, and the information I am getting is that it produces spectacular results when it comes to energising people and improving their sense of self-worth and wellbeing.

My final point is one that I find amazing. In the great cancer hospitals and clinics of this country, diet is seen as a sideline. In some of these institutions, the diet is, frankly, appalling, but I am not going to name any of them this afternoon. Like most colleagues, I have a big enough postbag already and I do not want to hear...
the defence. Anyone attending a big clinic in America, such as the Mayo Clinic, can say goodbye to dairy and sugar, and hello to more juices. The Haven in Fulham certainly uses a lot of raw juices and raw vegetables. Diet is absolutely fundamental. When I worked in the computer industry, we used to say “Garbage in; garbage out”—and the same applies to humans. Our outputs as a being—from afar, but, in any event, we hope that everything goes well for him.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us an opportunity to take part in this debate on a Thursday afternoon. I also thank the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), who is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on blood cancer, and who chairs it very well. He was instrumental in setting up the group, and we thank him for that. We are all very pleased to work alongside him, and to join in his endeavours.

As we know, the latest figures provided by Macmillan Cancer Support indicate that by the end of the current Parliament, one in two people will suffer from a form of cancer during their lifetimes. It is a sobering thought that, technically speaking, 50% of the 12 or so Members who are present in the Chamber now could be in that position in the next few years.

It is clear that improvements in diagnosis and treatment of the disease mean that more people are surviving it, or living for longer with it, and, as a consequence, 2.5 million people are living with or beyond it in the UK today. My father was a cancer survivor on three occasions. The hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) mentioned diet, and it is true that diet cannot be ignored as an element that we can use. As I have said, my dad—who passed away last year—survived cancer three times, and he lived for some 38 years after he was first diagnosed. He was very careful about his diet, and I believe that that was a factor in his survival. The doctors told him to be careful with his diet. However, he survived for three main reasons: the skill of the surgeons, the care of the nurses, and the fact that he was a man of great faith: the Prayer for God’s People was very important to him.

Nevertheless, the sheer scale of the problem of cancer demands a co-ordinated and proactive strategy. The Minister knows that I hold him in the utmost respect, as does every one of us in the House, but I must say to him that we need a strategy that will cover the whole of that problem. I am going to make some constructive comments, and I am convinced that his response will be the one that we hope to hear.

There is more that can and, indeed, must be done. It would be remiss of us not to mention the charities with which we are all involved, or of which we all know. There is Marie Curie, which does wonderful work, there is Action on Cancer, and there is Macmillan Cancer Support, and I am only mentioning those that I have direct contact with. There are also church groups. Elim church in Newtonwards, in my constituency, has a cancer group that meets every Friday. There are different groups that go to different places. I think that faith is very important when it comes to this issue.

I raised this issue during the debate on NHS funding, because cancer funding is an essential component of that. Macmillan has said that about one in four people living with or beyond cancer face disability or poor health following their treatment, and that that can remain the case for many years after treatment has ended. We should sometimes consider the care needs of cancer survivors who must face disabilities and a different lifestyle with which their families must also come to terms. It is vital that they are able to access the best care that is right for them when they need it, and to ensure that the NHS is set up to meet the changing needs of cancer patients. We have to have an NHS that responds to patients’ needs. Not only would this increase the quality and experience of survival, but it would ensure that resources put into tackling the disease are invested in the most efficient way. We must closely co-operate with cancer charities and patients to ensure that the NHS can respond in the best way possible.

This efficient use of money is key for the “Five Year Forward View” projections, indicating that expenditure on cancer services will need to grow by about 9% a year, reaching £13 billion by 2020-21. However, £13 billion of spending in 2020-21 and increased investment through the “Five Year Forward View” is what is required just to stand still. So while the figures look good, the needs indicate that we will have to look at the figures and the available funding again. This level of spending is likely to yield outcomes that continue to be below average when compared with similar international healthcare systems.

The hon. Member for Scunthorpe referred in his opening speech to international care and the need for us to be batting above our position on the international stage, and I agree. Now is therefore the time to ensure that money is spent as effectively as possible to give England and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland a better chance to achieve world-class cancer outcomes and deliver on the Government’s manifesto commitment. It is clear that we need greater funding of
research, and while charities do a wonderful job, and we appreciate them very much, there is most certainly a Government role that can be better fulfilled.

All Members have received the “Together for short lives” briefing, and it prompts me to highlight to the Minister the fact that there are barriers to research into children’s palliative care, which is a subject close to all our hearts when we have children of our own, and grandchildren as many of us now have. Despite improving survival rates, cancer is the leading cause of death in children, teenagers and young adults. The survival rate is significantly lower for teenagers and young adults than for children for several cancer types, including bone tumours and soft tissue sarcomas.

About 250 children aged zero to 14 lose their lives to cancer every year in the UK. In children aged 1 to 14, this is around one fifth of deaths. For teenagers and young adults, cancer accounts for around 310 deaths per year in the UK. I make a plea for children’s palliative care. I am sure that the civil servants will be looking for some notes to pass to the Minister to let him know what has been done, but I want to know what will be in done in future as well.

The cancer strategy recommended that by September 2016 a proposal should be developed to ensure that all children, teenagers and young adults diagnosed with cancer are asked at diagnosis for consent for their data and a tissue sample to be collected for use in future research studies. Data collection is important so that we can look to the future by studying the information and responding in such a way to give better help down the road. The strategy also states that NHS England should work with research funders to make best use of these resources in the future. What action can the Minister take to make sure that NHS England works to remove barriers to including children and young people with cancer in research?

Smoking has been mentioned, which reminds me of my first cigarette. I think I was five. My grandfather smoked Gallahers; there was no filter in them, and they were the strongest cigarettes in the world. Wee boys look up to their grandfathers, and I thought, “My Grandad is a great fella and he smokes away at those cigarettes. I wonder what it’s like.” I pestered my grandfather to let me try one, and he said, “Take a deep breath.” I did, and it would not be untrue to say that I was the colour of these Green Benches, and was violently sick. I never had any wish ever again to smoke a cigarette; if that is how to learn the lesson, I certainly learned it.

The Minister will know that I have a deep interest in Queen’s University Belfast and in the great research work that it does. It is world renowned for its medical research and especially for the research it carries out in the field of cancer. It is innovative, and it is looking into new drugs and medications to address cancers. Yes, we have survival rates of 50% or more, but we are still looking for the one drug that will cure all cancers, and to do that, we need research. I know that this is not the Minister’s direct responsibility, but I know that he has as deep an interest in this matter as I do.

The evidence-enabled outcomes research to inform precision oncology innovation adoption by health systems that is pioneered by Queen’s highlights how Northern Ireland punches above its weight in this rapidly evolving area, which is providing us with new approaches to prevent and treat this killer disease and preserve and improve the lives of cancer survivors. This success can and must be replicated by making greater funding available for research facilities and grants designated to changing the way in which cancer is approached and dealt with.

We have only to think of just how far the diagnosis of cancer has come in 50 years. The hon. Member for Scunthorpe spoke earlier of the achievements in this field, and also mentioned how far we still have to go. Queen’s University has partnerships with local businesses, and many foreign students come there to do their degrees and contribute to the research. There are also partnerships between Queen’s and universities here on the mainland, involving a wonderful group of universities and people making these things happen. They are making a difference through their research into cancer and the drugs that we need.

If we are to treat cancer successfully, we can do so only by adopting a continually updated approach. We have the initiative and desire to do this, but we need to ensure that the funding is in place as well. Governments need to take a positive interest in providing financial resources to ensure that everything is done to find the ultimate cure for cancer. Any strategy must make that clear, and the Minister must ensure that the necessary funding is available and enhanced when we negotiate Brexit. Brexit is mentioned in every debate we have now, but it is a fact of life. We have moved on, but we need assurances in this regard. I think we are having a debate on 19 December on the effect of Brexit on our universities.

We also need to address the postcode lottery in relation to the availability of cancer drugs. Again, this is not a criticism of the Minister—I do not do that—but it is a fact that cancer drugs are much more readily available in some parts of the UK than in others. In the past, central Government have supported the regional and devolved Administrations with funding for drugs. Is that anywhere in the equation at the moment? What discussions does he have with the regional and devolved Administrations—the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly—on agreeing cancer strategies and bids for resources?

A cancer strategy is a difficult one to negotiate, and it seems as though there can never be enough investment. We have to ask ourselves certain questions. Are we investing in the right things and producing the best outcomes? Are we sowing seeds for the future, and are we doing the best we can with what we have? It is up to each of us to raise these questions, and, for my part, I feel we must set aside more, do more and achieve more for the one in two people who will be effected by cancer.

3.58 pm

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): I should like to add my words of thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) for securing the debate. I very much regret the circumstances that mean he cannot be here today. It is unusual to be having a debate on cancer without him, as he works diligently on these matters. I send him my best wishes.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours, I very much welcomed the new cancer strategy that was announced in the Chamber just over a year ago, and I am delighted that we have this opportunity to scrutinise it again now. I congratulate the Government
on their focus and their direction of travel, and on the fact that survival times are constantly going up. We are absolutely going in the right direction, but like all hon. Members, I want to push the Government to go further, particularly in relation to brain tumours.

We heard earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) about the difficulty of early diagnosis of blood cancers and from the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) about pancreatic cancers. Early diagnosis, about which we hear time and again, is also a problem with brain tumours. People are often turned away by doctors and the cancer is found at the last moment. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) spoke about prevention, but unfortunately we think that only 1% of brain tumours may be preventable, so it is not really an area of exploration for us.

For patients with brain tumours, the only hope of a cure is through research and innovation into the many types of tumour. While such tumours represent just slightly under 3% of all cancers, they are the biggest killer among cancers of children and people under the age of 40. As for years of life lost, it is a devastating disease. Surprisingly, just 1% of the national cancer spend has gone into research into this area of cancer since 2002, which is clearly an injustice for those suffering from brain tumours and is why survival times have not been improving. Brain tumour research remains perennially underfunded, which was highlighted by the excellent Petitions Committee report—its first ever—into brain tumour research funding and the fine Westminster Hall debate. As a result, the Government set up a “task and finish” working group, for which I am extremely grateful. I look forward to the work that that brings forward, but we are not there yet and more must be done.

From reading the NHS’s “One year on” progress report, it appears that there has been much focus on meeting the clinical service recommendations set out in the original strategy. That should be welcomed, but there has been rather less focus on the research and innovation recommendations. While I recognise the importance of clinical services and their potential to improve outcomes in the diagnosis, treatment and care of people affected by brain tumours, we need equal, if not more, focus on research and innovation into potential cures. To that end, I have a few observations to make about several of the research points in the progress report and how realistic they are for patients with brain tumours and about research into the disease.

The report mentions a focus on modernising radiotherapy services and embedding research in the latest investment. Given the location, brain tumour radiotherapy comes with complex side effects, including increases in cranial pressure for some patients, alongside the more common side effects. More precise stereotactic radiotherapy is welcome, but it still does not represent a cure for many brain tumour patients, only an extension of life. The report states that a key 2020-21 metric is an “increase in five and ten year survival, with 57% surviving ten years or more”. However, Brain Tumour Research’s latest report on national research funding, released in October, shows that five-year survival for brain tumour patients is a mere 19.7% in England, lagging far behind other cancers. With a one year survival rate of 46.5%, which is well below the NHS’s 2020 target of 75%, the NHS looks set not to meet its own key measure on brain tumours. In doing so, it is letting down brain tumour patients.

A key paragraph from the NHS progress report states:

“Although a commitment has been made, NHS England has yet to publish its 2016/17 research plan, leaving the NHS without an up-to-date strategy for research. Now that the Accelerated Access Review has been published, we hope that the NHS England research plan is also delivered without delay.”

That appears to be an admission of prioritising other objectives over research. Clinical services are important in the here and now but without proper planning and investment into medical research, ongoing improvements in health outcomes of many diseases will not be realised, and brain tumour patient outcomes will continue to stagnate when compared with other cancers. I welcome many aspects of the progress report, including the launch of a new integrated cancer dashboard to ensure greater analysis of patient outcomes in local areas. I would be grateful to know whether phase 2 of the dashboard will include data on brain tumours, as they do not appear to have been collected in phase 1.

The launch of the national “Be Clear on Cancer” campaign will also hopefully lead to faster diagnosis of cancer for all patients. However, Brain Tumour Research’s latest report shows that, according to the National Cancer Research Institute, the Government spend on brain tumour research represents just 0.52% of its total spend on cancer. It is clear that brain tumour research continues to be drastically underfunded, even with the cancer strategy in place. Therefore, although the strategy is a major step in the right direction, it will need to be made to work for all types of cancer, including the rarer ones and, in particular, brain tumours. Every week, a family loses a child to brain tumour and, as with many cancers, the incidence of brain tumour is rising. I very much hope that that will be taken on board by the new Minister, and he will hear more from me in future about the need to increase brain tumour research.

4.5 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Thank you for calling me in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), and one benefit of this type of debate is that we learn something that we did not know before. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), who introduced the debate. I know that he has been a doughty campaigner, particularly on behalf of pancreatic cancer sufferers, since we were both elected, and the way he introduced the debate was fitting and appropriate. I also pass on my best wishes to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) and his family at this difficult time. It is a surprise not to see him in this Chamber for a debate such as this, but we understand the circumstances.

I want to start by paying tribute to Greg Lake, the rock star who, sadly, died yesterday after a long battle with cancer. To me, he was one of the icons. He founded King Crimson, and one of the first albums I bought was “In the Court of the Crimson King”. He then went on to form the supergroup Emerson, Lake and Palmer, and he also produced the iconic hit “I believe in Father Christmas”, which we hear at this time of year. I want to put that on the record because it is appropriate that we remember that people are suffering and dying as a result of cancer literally every day.
I declare my interest as chair of the all-party group on smoking and health, and I note that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) raised a number of the issues set out in the briefing that has been circulated quite widely. I want, however, to build on some of the things that have taken place. One of the key recommendations of the UK cancer strategy, which was founded not a year ago, as the title of this debate suggests, but 18 months ago, was that the replacement tobacco control plan should be published within a year. The last tobacco control plan expired a year ago, and we were promised a replacement in the summer. I know that “the summer” can stretch, but stretching it to Christmas is a bit of a long stretch. We recently had an excellent debate in Westminster Hall, where we briefed the new Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), on all the key issues relating to tobacco control. She promised that the new plan would be published soon, and she did so again when I raised it with her at Health questions. It will not surprise today’s Minister to learn that the one thing I have to ask to be given a date for the new plan—he should not tell me, “Soon”.

I now come to a significant fact. The Prime Minister said in her first major speech, on the steps of Downing Street, that she would be “fighting against the burning injustice that, if you’re born poor, you will die on average nine years earlier than others.” Smoking is responsible for half the difference in life expectancy between rich and poor in this country, so if we can cut smoking rates, we will help deliver the Prime Minister’s ambition. I ask the Minister to make sure that we get this tobacco control plan as quickly as possible.

We know that smoking is the greatest preventable cause of cancer worldwide. It accounts for more than one in four cancer deaths in the UK and for a fifth of all cancer cases. Smoking increases the risk of getting 14 other cancers and is responsible for more than 80% of cancer cases. Smoking increases the risk of getting lung cancer—the cancer that is the biggest killer in this country. It also has the worst five-year survival rate. Therefore, from that perspective, if we can cut smoking, we will cut the causes of cancer.

I wish to declare an interest in this matter. As I have said in this place on more than one occasion, both of my parents died, in 1979, of smoking-related diseases. They both died of cancer because they smoked virtually every day of their lives. I heard the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse say that he gave up in 1980. I still remember those terrible days when my parents died, and I want us to get to a position where no one has to remember those terrible days when my parents died, in 1979, of smoking-related diseases.

Rebecca Harris: Does my hon. Friend agree that those Members who said that we should not bring in a ban on smoking in cars with children because it was unpoliceable may now regret that? Children are policing that measure very well indeed.

Bob Blackman: When the change in law came through, a number of people objected to it, saying that it would not be enforceable. I remember back to my childhood when both of my parents were smoking in the car in front of me. It was difficult then as a child to say, “Please, will you not smoke, because I do not like it?” It was just easier to open the window. I do not want children to go through that. It is right and important that we changed the law in that way, as we know that second-hand smoke is a key killer of young lungs. It was a significant development—and a development that people did not think would happen. People did not think that we could introduce this change and get it through both Chambers, but I am delighted to say that we did it and that it was the right thing to do.

Jo Churchill: I thank my hon. Friend for providing such a powerful case. I could not agree with him more. To my way of thinking, banning smoking would do me, but we probably cannot go that far. Does he agree that the broader point of health economics is also important? Lung cancer is not the only issue. There is also emphysema, pulmonary disease and so on. If we sort out the tobacco issue, we could make much broader savings across the health service.

Bob Blackman: There are aspects of that with which I agree. The reality is that tobacco is the only product in the world, which, if used in the way that was intended, will kill us. Therefore, controlling it is vital.

We know as well that those with complex medical needs have the highest smoking rates. I am talking about people who are unemployed, who have mental health conditions, and who are in prison. I am also talking about the people whom I am championing at the moment—the homeless. All of them are much more likely to smoke than others, and they are also more likely to have the most health problems as a direct result. It is quite clear that the most disadvantaged members of society are more likely to smoke and therefore suffer cancer and other health-related problems as a result. Clearly, we need to take action. Quitting smoking reduces the likelihood of having cancer. It is also key that lungs can recover if one gives up smoking. We must encourage people to give up smoking and, more importantly, to try to prevent young people from starting. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) told us what happened to him as a five-year-old. I would not advocate that as a shock treatment. None the less, it is quite clear that stopping people starting to smoke is the best way forward, rather than trying to get them to give up later in life.

The recent report “Smoking Still Kills”, which was endorsed by no fewer than 129 organisations, recommended that, as a target, we should reduce adult smoking to less than 13% by 2020 and to 5% by 2035. I take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill); that is not ambitious enough. We should be going for a smoke-free Britain, or, rather, a smoke-free United Kingdom. I must get my phraseology correct.

To achieve that target, we need mass media campaigns, which the Department of Health has ceased. We need stop-smoking services to be encouraged, promoted and funded across the UK, and local authorities should enforce the necessary activities and to do their job. We know that mass media campaigns are extremely effective and cost-effective in prompting people to stop smoking and in discouraging young people from starting. In 2009 we had funding of just under £25 million for anti-smoking campaigns, but by 2015—last year—that had been reduced to £5.3 million. That is a false economy.
If we had much better funding for mass media campaigns, I am sure we could reduce the incidence of smoking far more. Equally, we know that stop-smoking services across the UK have been highly effective in reducing smoking rates. Smokers are up to four times more likely to quit if they have support from specialist groups and smoking services, compared to quitting cold. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse referred to when he gave up smoking, and he can remember the time and the date when he did so. Most people who have smoked in their adult lives have difficulty giving up and they need help and support. We should ensure that that is available.

The sad fact is that right across the UK smoking cessation services are either having their funding reduced or being closed altogether. That is extremely regrettable. I suggested to the Chancellor that by putting just 5p on a packet of 20 cigarettes and using that money to fund smoking cessation services we could provide all the money that is needed to continue smoking cessation services across the United Kingdom. That, to me, would be a very sensible investment indeed.

Funding for trading standards has fallen from £213 million in 2010 to £124 million now; the teams working in trading standards has been reduced radically. That means fewer local controls to target illicit tobacco in the way we should, to prevent some very nasty products from being used by people across the United Kingdom. That is a retrograde step. We need to invest in those services to make sure that we deliver better health outcomes.

We desperately need a new tobacco control plan and programme so that we can see the radical targets that are needed and the investment required across the United Kingdom. We should be setting out our stall—we want a smoke-free United Kingdom not by 2035 or beyond, but by 2020 or 2025. We can achieve it with the right programme. The key point is that if we deliver this plan, we will cut the rate of cancer deaths and the number of people suffering from cancer, which will reduce the burden on the national health service and allow us to take that money from the health service to use on the more difficult cancers that colleagues have mentioned. Those cancers are difficult to spot, difficult to treat and need specialist drugs and specialist treatments.

Henry Smith: My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) mentioned, if we could better treat those difficult cancers with those resources, we could go so much further.

Bob Blackman: Clearly, the priority has to be to eliminate what we can eliminate. If people smoke, they put themselves at risk of cancer—as I said, 14 different cancers are affected by smoking. If people stop smoking, it eliminates that risk. Equally, through diet, people can eliminate some of those risks. However, there are cancers that are not affected by smoking or diet. Therefore, if we can reuse resources and concentrate on the detection or treatment of the more difficult cancers, the health of the nation must be improved.

I bring my remarks to a close by saying that I hope we will get an answer in a few minutes to the question we are all asking: may we please have a date—with a day, a month and a year—when we will get the tobacco control plan?

4.20 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I, too, thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate. I also thank the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) for the way he introduced it, which has allowed us to conduct it in the tone that we have.

I came to this place after a journey with this disease, but I have been amazed since I have been here. The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) has fought the disease and now sits back in her place, and very welcome that is. The news about the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell), too, is welcome. I have heard my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) talk about his journey with the disease. My best wishes go to my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), who is on the journey at the moment. It is unusual not to see my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) in the Chamber, and my thoughts and prayers go out to him and his wife at this time.

Cancer is interesting: you don’t pick it, it picks you. We have heard from many Members that some cancers are preventable, but there are over 200 cancers. The debate often gets channelled towards rare diseases or prolific diseases such as breast cancer, prostate cancer or lung cancer—one of the big four. However, the debate we have had today is very broad, and I welcome that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) said we are doing better, which we are, but we could do even better, and I would like to return to the issue of research, which was brought up by my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), to see how we might do better there.

I welcome the commitment to the strategy. Implemented, it could be transformational, which is why I hope we will hear about better implementation. The “Five Year Forward View” shows that funding for cancer services will go up by 9%, reaching £13 billion by 2020-21.

As we have heard, one in two of us will suffer from cancer by the end of this Parliament, and 2.5 million people in this country are living with the disease. A question the strategy does not necessarily address properly is how we will care for those people. How will we deal with the survivors affected by it—625,000 people will be, as was mentioned earlier—who will carry forward some form of disability or hardship from having the disease? How will we deal with palliative care? Have the sustainability and transformation plans looked into palliative care and how we can address the needs of people who are looking towards the end of their lives?

I would also like to highlight teenage cancers, although it is usually breast cancer that I talk about in this place. I have a young friend for whom a year on means something different. She wrote to me on Sunday, after I said I was talking in this debate. I thought of her because, on 11 December last year, young Emily was diagnosed with cancer.
She said:

“Last year in December I was diagnosed with ALL Leukaemia. It was a very scary time for me and my family. But something that makes going to hospital that little bit nicer is how lovely the nurses are.

However, there were a lot of horrid bits during the start of treatment, such as hair loss and sickness.

Although, I still have two years to go of treatment to go on treatment, it is a lot less intense now I am in maintenance. The majority of chemo is in tablet form at home, one hospital visit a month and the HORRID, HORRID steroids, also once a month.”

I know that the steroids work as one of the main chemo therapy treatment - but they make me put on weight, feel emotional for no reason and sometimes cross and angry at my mum, who is my absolute rock and is always there for me, so that makes me feel very sad!

If I could change anything about the chemo it would definitely be; to not feel sick and not take steroids!”

Emily is a year on in her journey. I am sure I can speak for everybody in wishing her lots of success for a great journey.

One of the best things we can do for young people is to educate them. Education is a theme that has come out of this debate. I will not go over the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) about smoking, which they discussed so well, but merely say that education in that regard is important. Nor will I go over education around food and nutrition, which, as we have heard, is worked on by the Penny Brohn institute and The Haven.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned diet. Every oncologist I have ever had through all three of my journeys has spoken about the need to look after oneself through a good diet, keeping fit and exercise. We do our young people a disservice if we do not help them to lead better and healthier lives. I want to understand how the Minister is looking across Departments to make sure that this is addressed in the policies of the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Transport through cycle paths, trim trails, and right across the piece so that we can all lead healthier lives.

I am pleased that the industry is responding by reducing adverts for children and so on, and I would like this to go further, but parents have a huge part to play in their children’s lives. We have a huge part to play in our own lives with regard to what we eat and how we make choices about whether we smoke or have that extra beer or extra pie. There is some self-responsibility involved. If the Minister will do his bit by helping to educate people a little more through public health information, I am sure that we will step up to the mark and do our bit as well.

I welcome the setting up of cancer alliances and the appointment of Cally Palmer, the excellent head of the cancer taskforce. Early diagnosis is fundamental, as the hon. Member for Scunthorpe pointed out, because it gives us better outcomes, but the Government must set out, with NHS England, how funding will be strategically allocated. For example, will we be able to use mobile diagnostics and molecular diagnostics? I note my interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on personalised medicine, and vice-chair of the cancer APPG and the breast cancer APPG. If we could see who would benefit from the use of drugs, we would stop waste. For example, only 20% of women with breast cancer would benefit from Herceptin. Will the Minister address the point about the use of innovative technologies raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point?

How can we utilise the workforce in a more strategic approach? Macmillan, Cancer Research UK and 20 other organisations have developed eight principles on this. We need a workforce that is fit for the future, with people who understand the changing landscape that we are dealing with. I welcome the £130 million put into radiotherapy machines, but I would like to know that we have the radiographers who can work those machines and optimise their use.

More of us survive living with and beyond cancer, but metastatic cancer, in particular, is a type that we need to learn more about. That brings me on to the use of data. The Teenage Cancer Trust would welcome clinical trials with young people. There is a lack of data on metastatic breast cancer.

Rebecca Harris: My mother-in-law passed away from secondary metastatic breast cancer after opportunities to diagnose her were missed. It has been brought to my attention that we do not keep very good records or data on metastasized breast cancer. The cancer pathway does not provide a specialist nurse for those with breast cancer, and we do not seem to provide a specialist nurse for those with metastasized breast cancer, either.

Jo Churchill: I agree with my hon. Friend. People who are diagnosed with metastatic cancers—not only of the breast, but across the piece—feel like they are dropping through the cracks. They do not necessarily get a clinical nurse specialist, so that is another area for the specialist workforce to address. We need to make sure that we catch people on the journey, because it may be iterative. People may feel fit and well, but then find that they have to use the services again, so our approach needs to be flexible.

My hon. Friend has mentioned the importance of the ecosystem of research, hospitals and patients. My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley works hard with the Bloodwise charity, which is truly emblematic of an empowering organisation that works with the patient, clinician and researcher to help drive understanding. That is one way of giving UK plc a huge advantage. The hon. Member for Strangford has said that we need to look at the ecosystem, which is not just about cancer treatment at the end, but about researchers, universities, those brilliant students and staff whom we welcome from Europe and everyone in the pharmaceutical industry and charities working collaboratively to get the best outcome possible. That is how we will start to rise up the table and be as good as Sweden and other countries whose patients have truly fantastic outcomes.

Timely interventions can help recovery. I want to understand how recovery packages are being rolled out, because the issue of the workforce is critical.

The hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) has mentioned alternative therapies, which can be useful, but this is an area in which charities can help people. Only this week, the Countryside Alliance Foundation took women who have received treatment fly-fishing. They find that the experience of being outside, doing
something physical and enjoying nature gives them a huge sense of wellbeing. Personally, I do not think that it is a question of either/or; it is a question of joining them together.

Finally, I know that this is not the Minister’s area, but I would like him to take it back with him. I welcome the cancer drugs fund, but I am worried about those who benefit from combined treatments. Melanoma Focus has said that people on combined treatments may be disadvantaged, because not all of them will have access to the cancer drugs fund. I hope that the fund will be flexible and that the matter will be addressed.

4.33 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Like all other hon. Members who have spoken, I welcome this very important debate, which was secured by the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) and others. Although he is, uncharacteristically, not in his place, for very important reasons—we all send him and his wife our very best wishes—I want to place it on the record that this House and, indeed, the whole country owe him a huge debt of gratitude for all that he does on the issue and for his sterling leadership as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer in aiding our work in fighting this terrible disease.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), who opened the debate. Like me and several others, he is a chair of an all-party group on cancer; his group is on pancreatic cancer. He works tirelessly on this issue, and he chaired the Britain against cancer conference with aplomb this week. He set the scene today so well, and his knowledge and passion shone through.

I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in the debate: the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), the hon. Members for Bosworth (David Tredinnick), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris)—the hon. Lady is also the chair of a cancer all-party group—the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and my very good friend the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who is also vice-chair of the all-party group on breast cancer, of which I am a co-chair. They all made excellent contributions, and each and every one has made some important points about where we need to go next with the cancer strategy.

Much of the debate has focused on the report published by the all-party group on cancer, which looked at the progress made in implementing the cancer strategy one year on from its publication. The report makes many valid points and recommendations, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister on the specifics mentioned in it. The strategy can go a long way towards helping some of the estimated 2.5 million people living with cancer and the people who are diagnosed each year with cancer. The strategy, if implemented in full, could save 30,000 more lives per year by 2020.

That should be paired with the deeply worrying news that broke at the beginning of November that more than 130,000 patients a year have not been receiving cancer treatment on time, because cancer patients did not see a cancer specialist within the required 14 days. In some areas, the problem was so severe that more than 6,000 patients were forced to wait 104 days or more. In addition, our findings show that the Government met their 62-day target only once in the last 20 months. That should drive the Government to do more, and it is clear that we are seeing issues around the transformations already. That should not be knocked, and I am certainly not knocking it, but we must all continue to hold the Government to account where we can.

That is why in my contribution I want to touch on two areas: improvement in preventive measures that can help to reduce the occurrence of cancer, and the significant concerns that have recently been raised regarding the cancer workforce. We can all agree that prevention is key to addressing many health conditions, illnesses and diseases, and cancer is no different. As we have heard from several hon. Members in this debate, four in 10 cancers are preventable, and we should be doing much more to prevent cancers from developing, especially those that could have been prevented by lifestyle changes. Prevention was a central pillar of the cancer strategy, along with the five-year forward view.

The Minister is surely prepared for what I am going to say next, because I have said it to him often enough in my short time as the shadow Minister with responsibility for public health. It remains true, sadly. The false economy of cutting public health funding with no assessment of the ramifications of doing so on various aspects of our lives, or on other parts of the NHS and the wider health service, is seriously worrying. According to data collected by the Association of Directors of Public Health, smoking cessation services are expected to be reduced by 61% in 2016-17, with 5% of services completely decommissioned. For weight management support there will be a 52% reduction, with 12% being decommissioned. That is damming information when smoking and obesity are, as we have heard, two of the biggest preventable causes of cancer. We know that 100,000 people are dying each year from smoking-related diseases, including cancer.

It is right that the cancer strategy strongly recommended the introduction of a new tobacco control plan post haste and an ambitious plan for a smoke-free society by 2035, as has been outlined. We still have not seen the plan, despite being promised repeatedly over the last year that we would. I am sure that the Minister will give us further information on that in his response, and we all look forward to it. I hope that we see that plan sooner rather than later, and that hope has been echoed by several hon. Members from both sides of the House.

A continued delay will never be beneficial for our shared vision of a smoke-free society or for preventing cancer from happening. Another plan we have finally seen, although it has been considerably watered down, is the one for childhood obesity. After smoking, it is understood that obesity is the next biggest preventable cause of cancer. If we allow current trends to continue, there could be more than 670,000 additional cases of cancer by 2035. This completely goes against the vision set out in the cancer strategy. We saw some of the detail of the sugary drinks levy earlier this week, and it will be interesting to see how this develops in the months ahead, but I hope the Minister can outline a little bit more about what else he and his colleagues plan to do on obesity and its links to cancer.

As part of the cancer strategy, a review of the current workforce was called for so that we could fully understand the shortfalls—the areas of investment needed and the
gaps in the training of new and existing NHS staff—and meet the ambitious and noble goals set out in the strategy. In my capacity as chair of the all-party group on ovarian cancer and co-chair of the all-party group on breast cancer, I along with colleagues from both sides of the House—some of them are in the Chamber, notably the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds, who is a vice-chair of the all-party group on breast cancer—raised this at the beginning of the year with Health Education England, which is conducting the review. In our letter, we raised the need for immediate solutions to fill the specialist gaps in our cancer workforce, but also the need for a strategic, longer-term solution to be put in place.

The issue of the cancer workforce is an incredibly important one, especially given that Cancer Research UK warned over two weeks ago that pathology services in the UK were at a tipping point, and that the Royal College of Radiologists warned earlier in the year that 25% of NHS breast screening programmes were understaffed, with 13% of consultant breast radiologist posts left vacant, a figure that has doubled since 2010. That should spur on the Department to push ahead on the workforce issues that have been raised so often with Ministers.

Only this July, organisations such as Macmillan and Cancer Research UK joined with other organisations to call for a set of principles to be taken up by the Government, including a review of the current and future workforce. The Minister should also heed the words of Dr Harpal Kumar, who during an oral evidence session for the inquiry by the all-party group on cancer into progress on the implementation of the review, said that workforce issues remained “significant and severe”.

The ageing population, which means that more and more people could be diagnosed with cancer, and the much welcomed push to improve earlier diagnosis of cancer mean that pressures on the workforce will rise if the right support is not found, especially given the projection that 500,000 Britons will be diagnosed with cancer by 2035. That should remain at the forefront of the Minister’s mind, and in the minds of his officials and those who deal with workforce capacity.

It is clear that investment is failing to keep up with demand. That was raised in the cancer strategy, which called on NHS England to invest to unlock the extra capacity we need to meet the higher levels of cancer testing. The Opposition support the calls made only a few short months ago by the national cancer advisory group for NHS England’s cancer transformation board to prioritise a focus on the cancer workforce in the coming months. I hope the Minister will ensure that that happens, and that when we come back from the Christmas recess, we will start to see the much needed progress that has been called for.

In conclusion, the work that has started on the transformative programme is to be welcomed. It is a large task to undertake, yet the Government will not be allowed to sit back; I know that they and the Minister will not do so. It is up to all of us in this House, along with many people outside this place, to continue to do all we can to hold the Minister and the Government to account on what are such important and personal matters for all of us who have been affected by cancer, be it personally or through family and friends. We must all be critical friends in this drive to fight off cancer once and for all. We all agree that cancer should not be at the top of our list of health priorities. It is not destroying our health, very sadly, it will affect us all in some way. We must ensure that we get this right, because we cannot afford to get it wrong.

4.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): It is a pleasure to respond to this really important debate. I, too, would like to start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). I wish him and his wife the best in the journey they are on. I have been in this job a few months now and he has been extremely diligent in coming to see me and talking to me to ensure that cancer is, as it should be, right at the top of my radar screen. He also organised, with the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), an excellent Britain against Cancer event on Tuesday, which was attended by 400 people.

What has happened to my hon. Friend and his family reinforces what we all know: cancer affects us all. One person is diagnosed with cancer every two minutes. During the course of this debate, 100 people will have received a cancer diagnosis in England. That shows how important the issue is and how we need to make progress. There are a lot of chairs of all-party groups in the Chamber and all Members have spoken from a lot of personal knowledge and experience. I will not have time to respond in detail to every point raised.

I will start by making a generic point that this debate and others like it remind us that our health service is not principally about bricks and mortar. Survival rates are far more important. The hon. Member for Scunthorpe gave a very fair and reasonable introduction to the debate in terms of what the priorities ought to be. On a typical day, when I walk across the Chamber and the Lobby about two Members will talk to me about their concerns in relation to some aspect of hospital reconfiguration or A&E downgrades and so on. Those are fair concerns, which we all need to be concerned about in our own patches. However, I am not accosted by Members saying they are concerned that their clinical commissioning group has lower than average survival rates. Over time, we need to learn to think about them, too. We have not talked about this in any detail, but the Government have published four indicators that rank every clinical commissioning group in the country. The news was not brilliant when it came out, but that transparency is very powerful. We all ought to get used to this being as important to our constituents—arguably more so—than some of the bricks and mortar concerns that we tend to spend our time on.

As I said, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe was fair. I think the phrase he used was that a lot has been done, but that more needs to happen. I think all Members would probably agree with that. A lot of good things are being done. Our one-year, five-year and 10-year survival rates are all improving for all cancer types. What we have learned in this debate is that we talk about aggregate cancer survival rates, but there are very large variabilities. My hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) made a very good point with regard to brain tumours having a 19% five-year survival rate, against a target for all cancer types of
70%. That is absolutely true. One of the themes of the debate has been that we are making less progress on some rarer cancer types and we need to do better.

We are making progress on early diagnosis. There are eight cancer targets and we are now meeting seven of them. As Members have pointed out, however, not least the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) who speaks for the Opposition, one very important cancer target is not being met: the 62-day target. The strategy needs to drive and develop that and we need to work harder.

We have been reminded that, in spite of the progress made, we are not, by any means, the best in the world at this. We are not even the best in Europe. Indeed, there is evidence that we are below the average in Europe for most cancer types. It is fair to say that we are catching up in many cases but not in all. In particular, we are not closing the gap with the rest of Europe on lung cancer, which several hon. Members have talked about. We need to be aware of that and focus on it.

As I said on Tuesday at the conference, when I started this role I was struck by the discovery that we had had five cancer strategies in the last 20 years. We can deduce two things from that: first, this is a cross-party issue—all Governments do cancer strategies—and secondly, and more importantly, we do not need another strategy. We do not need more ideas about what we need to do; instead, we need to deliver, with a strong focus, the 96 points set out in the cancer strategy and drive them through over its final four years. We need to make that happen.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West used a very good phrase when she said we must be “critical friends” in this process, and so we must. Every Member, despite their having different perspectives, needs “critical friends” in this process, and so we must. Every West used a very good phrase when she said we must be happen.

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what is being done, by when and by whom, and to
ensure that we have milestones, targets and deliverables.
Frankly, though, we have some way to go before we get
that as clear as it needs to be. My hon. Friend the Member
for Basildon and Billericay has pointed out to me several times that we need to focus on output measures, not on process and input measures, and that, too, is true. It is something we could make work better.

In the strategy, there are six programmes of work, including on prevention, early diagnoses, commissioning, high-quality modern services and, importantly, patient experience and living well beyond cancer. My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) made some very good points about the overall approach. This is not just a technical matter; we need to get better on patient experience and living beyond cancer. I spoke at an event organised by the all-party group on ovarian cancer. At that event, I met a lady who had been given a prognosis of six months to live, and she told me that she had no support in terms of an ongoing dialogue with a clinical nurse—that clearly is a failure and completely inadequate. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) talked about clinical nurses. Our response, through the strategy, is to put in place cancer recovery packages for everyone with a diagnosis. That is important, although the point was well made about the staffing implications. We need to address that as well, and we will.

A point was made about rarer cancers, particularly brain and blood cancers. We need to make more progress more quickly on research, and we do not have the many answers on those cancers as on others. I am talking not just about research by the Government, but about Cancer Research UK and the other charities. As several colleagues said, the voluntary sector is extremely important, and of course it is. Macmillan, Marie Curie, Cancer Research UK, plus the hundreds of small charities in our constituencies, make a big difference.

We also know that the workforce matters. This is a consistent stream in the strategy and something that it needs to get right.

I was asked by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe in his opening comments how are holding Health Education England to account on the workforce requirements. I meet Professor Cummings regularly, as does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, not just on this aspect of the workforce but on other related responsibilities, such as increasing the number of GPs working in primary practice.

We need to make progress quickly on certain issues. We know that we do not have enough radiographers, for example. The point was made that there is no point in having linear accelerators if we do not have people to work them. That is right, but let us at least be grateful for, and pleased about, the fact that we are now rolling out the linear accelerators that Simon Stevens announced this week at 15 locations in all parts of our country. Endoscopy has been a real area of shortage, and it has been called out as a specific work stream within the 96 areas of the cancer strategy. We will have 200 extra endoscopists trained by 2020, 40 of whom are already in place, and we will continue to build on that. Workforce generally is of massive importance.

I have not answered all the questions and points raised in the debate. I have not so far talked about the tobacco control plan. Several Members mentioned this issue. All I can say now, I am afraid, is that it will happen soon. That is the answer. The relevant Minister has informed me that she is determined to get this right, and I guess we can all agree that getting it right is indeed important. I am probably as disappointed as some Members that the process of the strategy is not as developed as we would like, but let me say that we are doing a lot on smoking by placing explicit images on packages and that type of thing. We are doing more than many other countries on that, and we should not forget it. It is not all about strategy.

I am about to finish, but I will say that we need to come back to this debate in a year’s time. I hope that the Backbench Business Committee and the chairmen of all the cancer all-party groups will make sure that we have a debate in this place every year about the cancer strategy, so that the Government can be held to account by critical friends. We all need to make sure that we focus on getting this strategy delivered. We absolutely do not need another strategy until 2020, and we will have made massive potential steps forward if we achieve what we have set out.

David Tredinnick: My hon. Friend tempts me by saying that he is about to sit down with three minutes to go. May I come to see him to discuss the announcement of the £200 million for support services?
David Mowat: I would be happy to speak to my hon. Friend about that. He made the point that there was no investment in a number of areas. I was briefed that we are putting in £5 million to the two Haven centres that are being put together. I would be happy to speak to my hon. Friend about the £200 million, although I did not agree with every point he made. At this point, I will sit down.

4.58 pm

Nic Dakin: I thank the Minister for his response to what he was right to say has been a very good debate among critical friends, to steal the excellent point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and the hon. Members for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) and for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) all highlighted the importance of public health measures, and particularly smoking cessation campaigns, in preventing cancer. We are reassured that we will have the plan “soon”.

The hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), who is the chair of the all-party group on blood cancer, spoke movingly from personal experience about how blood cancers thunder into people’s lives unexpectedly. The hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), who is chair of the all-party group on brain tumours, echoed that in much that she said about the need to do something about these cancers that are stuck. She reminded us that brain cancer is the biggest killer of young people, and she was right to say that although the cancer strategy is a strong step in the right direction, we need to do more.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) echoed the point that we need to do even better. As the hon. Member for Bosworth said, if we have moved from 60% to 70%, why not to 80%? The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), a cancer survivor herself, posed a series of very challenging questions—exactly the sort of questions that should drive better performance as we move forward.

We are at a pivotal moment for the cancer services. I know that many people will be heartened by the Minister’s comments both today and on Tuesday, at the Britain against Cancer event. He was right to say that it is easy to write strategies, but now is the time to deliver.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered the Cancer Strategy one year on.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Monday 12 December, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Secretary Damian Green relating to the Welfare Cap not later than ninety minutes after their commencement; such Questions shall include the Questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Heather Wheeler.)

Governance of the BBC

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

5 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): On 7 October, The Sun released a video of the gymnast Louis Smith and friends having fun at the expense of Islamic prayer practices. This unleashed a torrent of venom in the media and beyond, with Louis Smith being widely denounced as Islamophobic. The sensationalist reporting of his actions in some sections of the media resulted in the gymnast’s receiving multiple death threats.

The BBC has a rich heritage of aiming both excoriating and gentle humour in the direction of Christianity over the past 40 years. We have had Dave Allen, Monty Python and the Vicar of Dibley, and I particularly remember “Not the Nine O’Clock News”, in the early 1980s, taking the Church of England to task for its views on homosexuality. So, given its proud tradition of tackling religious sensibilities, one could be forgiven for thinking that the BBC would inject some common sense and balance into the reporting of Louis Smith’s actions.

Not a bit of it: instead of trying to insert itself between Louis Smith and the mob, the corporation placed itself firmly at the head of the mob.

On 13 October, during a radio interview on Radio 5 live, the BBC talk show host Emma Barnett irresponsibly painted Louis Smith as both Islamophobic and a racist, defining “phobic” as “sort of hateful or it can mean mimicking or it can be taking the mickey”.

Ms Barnett is clearly as unfamiliar with the Oxford English Dictionary as she is with the BBC’s output of the past 40 years. In condemning Louis Smith as “phobic” for taking the “mickey” out of faith, she has placed a question mark over the motives and legacy of some of the UK’s greatest deceased and living comedians. Now, I recognise that Louis Smith is never going to be the world’s greatest comedian, but we—and the BBC—should be blind to that fact, because the law applies as much to gymnasts as it does to joke-tellers.

More worrying than Ms Barnett’s ignorance over the law and her employer’s heritage was her failure to condemn the multiple death threats that Louis Smith had received. Having put the question and received the answer, at no point did she intervene to say that those death threats were wrong and entirely unjustifiable. She had eight immediate opportunities to do that, and a further 23 throughout the remainder of the interview. None of those opportunities was taken.

Having heard the interview, I took the view that the BBC had been unbalanced in its approach to Louis Smith, with the inquisitorial tone of the interview heightening the already significant threat to his wellbeing and safety. I was also concerned that the BBC was once again promoting the narrative that all British Muslims are thin-skinned and easily offended. I raised my concerns in writing with the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and Rona Fairhead, the chairman of the BBC Trust.
The response that I received from those three figures of authority was disappointing. The Secretaries of State delegated their reply to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital and Culture, who will be responding to this debate. In an anodyne letter sent to me on 18 November, he said that

“responsibility for what is broadcast rests with the broadcasters and organisations which regulate broadcasting.”

That is, of course, absolutely correct, but what was evident in his letter was a complete unwillingness on the Government’s part even to engage with the subject of my concerns, which, at their core, centred on the hounding of a young man for exercising a form of speech that was entirely protected in law by section 29J of the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006. Perhaps the Government felt that in view of the sensitivities surrounding the subject area, it was all too difficult publicly to champion a principle of UK law. Instead they breezily stated that:

“It is a long-standing principle that the Government do not interfere in programme matters, either on arrangements for scheduling or on content. It is important to maintain the principle of freedom of expression which political interference could undermine.”

Like the Minister, I am very pro-freedom of expression, but he seems blind to my concern that the BBC, while benefiting from our country’s wonderful protections and traditions, seeks to belittle and denigrate others, such as Louis Smith, for the temerity to expect that the same rights and courtesies should extend to them.

Having taken up my concerns with the BBC, I received a letter from its director-general, Tony Hall, with an attached note of investigation prepared by Rozina Breen, head of news at Radio 5 Live. The response is both tone deaf and rather chilling. In relation to my concern about the failure of Emma Barnett, the interviewing journalist, to condemn those issuing Louis Smith with death threats, I was told:

“Death threats are widely understood to be unacceptable in our society and we don’t believe it was therefore necessary for Emma Barnett to condemn the reported death threats, on air as you suggest.”

That is a simply stunning response. Yes, death threats are widely known to be a bad thing, but clearly in the case of Louis Smith this message had yet to penetrate into the consciousness of those calling for him to be killed. Perhaps, therefore, having painted him as Islamophobic, the BBC may have felt some obligation to strike a note of cautionary balance in Louis Smith’s favour. It obviously felt otherwise.

Even more grotesquely, in response to my concerns that the interview had further endangered Louis Smith’s life, Ms Breen of the BBC stated that:

“I can’t accept that this interview endangered Mr Smith’s well-being. If anything, by allowing him an opportunity to make his apologies to a very large audience, the interview might have served to demonstrate the sincerity of his apologies and appease people who might be angry with him.”

That is a breath-taking statement. Setting aside the fact that Louis Smith had nothing to apologise for, I want to focus on the BBC’s belief that its interview allowed Louis Smith the opportunity to beg for his life. I hope I am wrong in this analysis but, whatever the denials offered up by the BBC, I fear that I am right.

The BBC is a public service broadcaster funded by a public use tax. It has a duty to be balanced and measured in its reporting and news output. In the case of Louis Smith, it was not. The real story that the BBC missed, or chose not to report, was the hounding of a man simply for finding humour in religion.

In this whole sorry affair the only person who is deserving of an apology is Louis Smith himself. He is owed an apology from the Muslim Council of Britain for its ridiculous overplaying of Muslim sensitivities towards their faith, for having toured the radio and television studios to be publicly humiliated and smeared, and for having missed his Olympic homecoming parade to visit mosques. The Muslim Council of Britain said that the apology issued by Louis Smith “falls well short of addressing the hurt caused against Muslims”.

What uncharitable nonsense from an organisation that seeks to align this organisation firmly with the bullies and the name-callers.

Having helped ensure the humiliation of Louis Smith and his banning from his sport, Harun Khan, the secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain, tweeted:

“Louis Smith already regretted his action and all good now. No one asked for a ban. Let’s work towards developing great sportspeople.”

This faux act of magnanimity would have been genuine and carried real weight if stated on day one of the story, and not, as was the case, after the humiliation was complete.

In relation to his ban, Louis Smith is owed an apology from British Gymnastics for its cowardly decision to suspend him for a period of two months—a decision that aligns this organisation firmly with the bullies and the name-callers.

Turning to our public service broadcaster once again, Louis Smith is owed an apology by the BBC and Emma Barnett for the callous and cruel treatment they subjected him to, providing a bear pit environment where he was ruthlessly painted as Islamophobic. The BBC’s conduct in this matter was both wicked and irresponsible. It might also like to reflect on its wider conduct in the way that it represents the Muslim community. It always seems to favour the loud and angry voices of the fringe over those with a self-confident, relaxed and gentle tone.

Finally, Louis Smith is owed an apology by the Government. In his hours, days and weeks of need, Ministers were nowhere to be seen. Even if the Government find the idea of British values too nebulous a concept to get their head around, they could at the very least have pointed out that Louis Smith’s actions were entirely protected and catered for in UK law. As I have said, the law in relation to the ridicule of faith is here for all of us, not just for comedians. I warn the Minister that many will construe the Government’s silence in the matter of Louis Smith as one which heralds, de facto, the reintroduction of an unwritten blasphemy law, enforced by threat and thuggery.

Sadly, I suspect that there is more chance of The Sun newspaper reflecting on its actions and admitting that it could have handled things better than the hubristic BBC doing so. The hounding of Louis Smith has shamed
Our public service broadcaster, as it has shamed our nation and its laws. In our liberal and open society, freedom of worship marches hand in hand with the freedom to lampoon religion. Quite simply, that is the deal.

5.11 pm

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) for securing the debate, and for his dogged pursuit of justice and reasonableness on behalf of his constituent. The case he has raised has at its heart the question of how best to protect free speech and tolerance of others. He has put his case characteristically eloquently and powerfully.

The Government’s view is that the treatment that Mr Smith received on social media and elsewhere was wholly and deeply unacceptable. I am very sorry that Mr Smith received death threats and threats of violence, which are not only unacceptable but potentially illegal, whether made online or offline. We have seen cases, including several involving Members of Parliament, of online threats that were potentially illegal. In some cases, they have been found to be illegal, and those findings are based on existing law, in which it is immaterial whether a threat is made online or offline. Threats of violence are just as illegal online as they are offline.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said last month at Prime Minister’s questions:

“We value freedom of expression and freedom of speech in this country—that is absolutely essential in underpinning our democracy—but we also value tolerance of others and tolerance in relation to religions.”—[Official Report, 2 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 888.]

It is a historic principle that people should have that freedom of expression, and it is of course right that with that freedom comes the responsibility to recognise the importance of tolerance towards others. We should all acknowledge and welcome the fact that Mr Smith has apologised for any offence caused, as my hon. Friend said.

Freedom of expression operates within a framework. The freedom to offend, whether wise or not, is a vital part of freedom of expression, but the freedom to threaten violence is not.

That brings me to the role of the BBC. It is an important part of our constitutional settlement that the Government do not comment on the way the BBC, or indeed any other news outlet, reports individual stories, for the very good reason that it is operationally and editorially independent—so I am going to resist the temptation to do that now, just as I did in my earlier correspondence with my hon. Friend. I will say, however, that the right to freedom of speech—and with it the right to mock and poke fun—is something that the BBC itself holds very dear in its own content, as many Members of the House know only too well. Indeed, the mocking of our institutions, our politicians and our religions is a very BBC thing. There was “That Was the Week That Was” and “Spitting Image”. My hon. Friend mentioned “The Vicar of Dibley” and I mention it, too. The BBC even named a brilliant show after mocking whole weeks. Our love of mockery is very British, and long may it be so.

The right to mock is of course balanced by a responsibility to be reasonable and restrained, but it is a right that we should uphold.

The process of the BBC charter review, which formally concluded this week, addressed the question of how the BBC should respond to concerns and complaints. The current model, based on the BBC Trust, is widely agreed not to work, so we have sought to improve and streamline how the BBC deals with complaints to ensure that it is clearly answerable to the people who pay for it, should they think that the BBC has failed in its duty of due accuracy and impartiality. The new charter will introduce two changes: a simpler overall complaints system; and external regulatory oversight of complaints made on editorial matters. In the first instance, the BBC will handle complaints about editorial things, and it is right that the broadcaster should deal with complaints about its own conduct to start with. The new charter will therefore give the BBC’s new unitary board responsibility for how the BBC deals with complaints before any appeals are made to Ofcom. The new board will be chaired by a non-executive director and will comprise a majority of non-executive members, ensuring that the BBC is properly held to account for the way it deals with complaints.

As a whole, the changes that the Government have made to the BBC’s governance will mean that the BBC is better governed and more accountable to the people who pay for it. In designing the new governance structure, we wanted to be clear that the day-to-day editorial decision making must rest with the director-general as the editor-in-chief, but the director-general will also be directly accountable to the new BBC board. That strikes the right balance between the director-general as the editor-in-chief and the new board, which sets the editorial standards and guidelines.

In cases where a complainant is unsatisfied with the BBC’s response, or where the BBC fails to respond in a timely manner, the complainant will for the first time then be able to complain to Ofcom. Ofcom may, in exceptional circumstances, intervene at an earlier stage to handle and resolve a relevant complaint that has not been resolved by the BBC. Ofcom will be able to consider relevant complaints about BBC content. While I acknowledge that my hon. Friend is not at all happy with how the BBC dealt with this case, Ofcom is well placed to take on this new regulatory role.

Beyond the specifics of individual editorial decisions or cases, there is of course an important wider point to reflect on: how broadcasters deliver their news content with due impartiality. Ofcom is currently consulting on its proposed approach for regulating BBC editorial content. This is the first in a series of consultations that Ofcom is publishing as it prepares for its new BBC duties.

I am of the view that the role that our public service broadcasters, and other responsible news providers, take in presenting the news with due accuracy and due impartiality is increasingly important. We have a broad and fragmented news environment, including print, broadcast, classic websites and social media. The way in which news is generated and shared has changed enormously over the past decade. My hon. Friend’s example is a case in point, owing to the interaction between social media and mainstream media. The emergence of the citizen journalist who, at best, can truly democratise news provision and reflect unfolding events in real time is an important development.
The plethora of news sites now available allows curious and interested consumers a wealth of sources to interrogate but, as we are all aware, this is not a wholly positive picture. For each site that takes a responsible attitude toward news provision, others do not. Added to that, the use of social media as a main source through which news is consumed is increasing, particularly so for young adults, meaning that context may be lost and that consumers may be less clear about the source of news they are reading. The ability of social media users to share news content along with their comments on that content—both positive and negative—becomes an integral part of the way that news is consumed.

All of that makes the role of our broadcasters in providing trusted, reasonable and impartial news all the more important. It is right, as this debate suggests, that we look to the BBC—and to other broadcast news outlets—to uphold the highest standards in its coverage. We must ensure broadcasters have the confidence to broadcast fairly, impartially and accurately, based on values of free speech and tolerance that we hold dear.

I hope that in responding in this way, in changing the way the BBC is regulated and in underlining in this House the importance of freedom of speech and the value that we attach to that freedom not only to speak, but to mock and, in some cases, to offend, we are demonstrating that the age-old principle of freedom of speech is alive and well. We must continue to do the work of upholding it.

Question put and agreed to.

5.20 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 12 December 2016

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

US Administration: NATO

1. Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with the incoming US Administration on their policy on article 5 of the NATO treaty.

2. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the incoming US Administration on their policy on article 5 of the NATO treaty.

3. Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the incoming US Administration on their role in NATO.

4. Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the incoming US Administration on their role in NATO.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): President-elect Trump has confirmed the importance of NATO during telephone calls with the Prime Minister and the NATO Secretary-General. I have written to General James Mattis to congratulate him on his nomination as Secretary of Defence, and I look forward to meeting him after his confirmation hearing.

Jonathan Reynolds: General James Mattis has warned against appeasing the Russian regime and has said it is President Putin’s intention to break NATO apart. Does the Secretary of State agree that President-elect Trump would do well to listen to his general and to recommit the US unequivocally not just to NATO but to article 5?

Sir Michael Fallon: General Mattis is not only experienced in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan but has served as a NATO commander. He is well aware of the importance of the alliance not only to our security but to the United States itself, and it is the unity of the alliance that sends the most powerful message to President Putin.

Jeff Smith: At the recent Warsaw summit, NATO leaders made a commitment to step up collective action against Daesh. What assurances has the Secretary of State had from the incoming Administration that they remain committed to that and to the principle of collective defence in working with allies in the fight against Daesh?

Sir Michael Fallon: I shall be hosting the counter-Daesh coalition ministerial meeting in London on Thursday. I have seen nothing from the incoming Administration’s plans to indicate that they would take any different approach. The United States is leading the coalition work against Daesh. Considerable progress is being made in Iraq and starting to be made in Syria. NATO, too, now has a contribution to make to that.

Dan Jarvis: Given the precision airdrop capability of the US and NATO, what conversations has the Secretary of State had with the incoming US Administration and with other allies on the feasibility of using this specific capability to alleviate the suffering in Aleppo?

Sir Michael Fallon: We have continually examined options for getting aid into Aleppo, where people are now in the most appalling situation. It is almost impossible to get food or medicines in by airdrop, when the air defences are controlled by Russia and the Syrian regime and permissions are not forthcoming. We have looked at other options, such as using the airfield—but it is outside the control of the moderate opposition—and militarised convoys. We will continue to look at all kinds of options, but it is already very, very late for the people of eastern Aleppo.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir George Howarth. Where is he? I call Mr Bob Stewart.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): When I was a young officer serving in the British Army of the Rhine and in West Berlin, I made the assumption that article 5 was a trigger: if anyone attacked a NATO nation, every member would automatically go to war. I am wondering whether that is exactly right now or whether we have just a commitment to consult, which would take much longer than an automatic reversion to war.

Sir Michael Fallon: Article 5 was last invoked after 9/11, when the rest of the alliance pledged to do everything possible to help the United States following the most appalling attack on the twin towers. The answer to my hon. Friend’s question, of course, is that once article 5 is triggered, each member state has to examine its obligations to the alliance as a whole. Before that stage, as tensions escalate, I would expect the deployments that we have prepared, including the very high readiness taskforce, to be enacted.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the new Administration will be much more interested in deeds than in words when it comes to NATO and article 5, and that Britain is setting an example for the rest of Europe not just on the 2% but with the troop deployments we plan for Poland and the Baltic states?

Sir Michael Fallon: I agree with my hon. Friend, and, indeed, we agree with President-elect Trump’s call for other European countries to do more. It is true that eight of the 28 members have now set in place firm plans to reach the 2% figure. We reach 2%, but some
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It was a pleasure to read recently of the work that HMS Torbay has been doing in helping to secure the maritime security of our allies. Does the Secretary of State agree, though, that it is vital that the incoming US Administration in January recognise that there is no such thing as a peripheral NATO state, because an attack on one is an attack on all?

Sir Michael Fallon: Absolutely; that is the principle of collective defence, and it is the best possible message to send on any further aggression from Russia—we have seen a huge increase in Russian submarine activity in recent years—or indeed on the threat from terrorism. We stand together.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): On Friday, the head of MI6, Alex Younger, warned about Russian meddling in UK domestic politics. Given the revelations from the CIA about the Kremlin’s involvement in influencing the outcome of the US election, what discussions has the Secretary of State had with our NATO allies—US and European—to tackle this type of hybrid warfare interfering in other countries’ democratic electoral processes?

Sir Michael Fallon: We are now seeing a rather disturbing pattern of allegations of direct Russian interference in areas as far apart as Bulgaria, the referendum in the Netherlands, and continuing pressure on the Baltic states. We agreed at Warsaw that the European Union and NATO would come together to co-operate on hybrid warfare, in particular, and to look at the various techniques that were necessary to help us all resist that kind of pressure.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): For many years in this Chamber, people have been asking why European countries that are members of NATO are not spending 2%, and we are always told that it will happen, but it just does not seem to happen. What pressure can we put on other members of NATO to fulfil their commitment?

Sir Michael Fallon: We agreed this commitment at the Wales summit back in the autumn of 2014. That, at least, has halted the decline in defence spending across the alliance. As I said, a number of member states—roughly half the alliance—are now committed to increasing their spending, and eight of the 28 are firmly planning to get up to 2%. The transparency involved in publishing the table every year in itself stiffens the arm of Defence Ministers when they are tackling their Finance Ministers. It is certainly encouraging to see the increase in defence spending by the countries that feel most vulnerable: the Baltic states, for example, with increases also in Bulgaria and Romania.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State on this issue? The question was about the discussions he has had with the President-elect, and his answer was that the President-elect “confirmed the importance of NATO”. What does that actually mean for article 5 and for the policies that President-elect Trump will pursue when he becomes President? NATO and the defenders of the west need to know the answers on that. What are the Government actually saying to President-elect Trump about what policies he should pursue, and what are the answers that the Secretary of State is getting? We need a bit more than “confirmed the importance of NATO”.

Mr Speaker: That was a lot of questions to which I am sure a dextrous and pithy reply will trip forth from the tongue of the Secretary of State.

Sir Michael Fallon: As I indicated, there have been two phone calls with the Prime Minister. The incoming President has not yet taken office, and his nominees for the different offices have yet to be confirmed, but there is a clear understanding between us and the United States Administration of the importance of NATO not simply to us here but to the United States itself.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): My colleagues and I on Labour’s defence team recently returned from a briefing visit to NATO in Brussels and to SHAPE—Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe—in Mons, where we were told about plans to ensure the security of the Baltic states and, of course, about our armed forces’ leading role in helping to defend Estonia. May I press the Secretary of State further on what assessment he and his Department have made of the impact that President-elect Trump’s policies may have on the ability of NATO to implement article 5, should that ever be necessary?

Sir Michael Fallon: The United States itself will be leading one of the four forward battalions next year. It will be leading the battalion in Poland, and we will be adding a company of our own troops to that battalion. We, as the hon. Gentleman said, will be leading in Estonia, and Canada and Germany will be leading in the other two countries. We have absolutely no evidence at the moment that the United States is going to alter its position on that; on the contrary, I have been over the Atlantic twice in the past three weeks, and from my discussions with the US military and with Senators and Congressmen who take an interest in defence, I have every reason to believe that the United States will confirm its commitment to the alliance.

Armed Forces: Legal Claims

2. Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): What progress his Department has made on protecting the armed forces from persistent legal claims. [907772]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning): We have made significant progress in recent months: we announced our intention to derogate from the relevant articles of the European convention on human rights in future conflicts where appropriate, and I have launched a consultation on enhanced compensation for soldiers injured or killed in combat, so that members of the armed forces and their families do not have to spend years waiting to pursue claims against the Ministry of Defence. We hope to announce further measures shortly.
Andrew Bingham: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. My constituent 87-year-old Arnold Hustwick, himself a former soldier, will also welcome that news, because he has expressed his outrage about some of these claims. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if it was not for the MOD submitting evidence of malpractice by Mr Phil Shiner, of Public Interest Lawyers, and the Ministry of Justice cancelling Mr Shiner’s legal aid contract, this man would still be hounding our soldiers?

Mike Penning: I was at the Ministry of Justice when we revoked the legal aid, and if it was not for this Secretary of State and my former colleague sending submissions to the Solicitors Regulation Authority, Mr Shiner would probably still be pursuing our soldiers and servicemen. Mr Shiner should probably do exactly what the Secretary of State called for him to do in December 2014 and apologise to our former servicemen.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): As someone who has served with distinction in Northern Ireland, the Minister of State must be disgusted by the industrial-scale abuse of the legal process against former soldiers, which has impugned the reputation of every single soldier who has served in Ulster over the last 40 years. Will he and his Department undertake to be a bulwark against that abuse and against that witch hunt, and will he stand up and make sure that it is stopped forthwith?

Mike Penning: I had the honour of serving in the Province and—I hope—I was part of the peace process. The vast majority of our servicemen and women served with distinction in Northern Ireland. The MOD and I will continue to support the police force in Northern Ireland with its ongoing inquiries. That is what was said on the radio at the weekend: these are not new investigations; they are ongoing investigations. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for the work that he has done in the past, and I wish him a happy 50th birthday today.

Mr Speaker: I had thought that the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) was stirring in his seat. If he were standing, I would call him, but if he is not, I will not. He is not, so I will not.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) for not standing.

In the last few years, some 3,500 soldiers have had their lives wrecked by the investigations of the Iraq Historic Allegations Team. That has been at a cost of some £90 million to Her Majesty’s Treasury, and I think one single prosecution has resulted from it. Surely, now that we have seen the back of Mr Shiner, it is time for the Government to bring to an end the dreadful IHAT organisation.

Mike Penning: The Secretary of State and I are doing everything we can to get IHAT to come to its conclusions and decide what it is going to do. The vast majority of those investigations will be concluded, and we hope and expect that in the vast majority of cases, IHAT will feel that there is no action to be taken. We must make sure that the investigations take place correctly so that they do not end up in some European court somewhere.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): It is not just a question of the IHAT inquiry and the disgraceful behaviour of the disreputable solicitor Phil Shiner; we are now faced with the prospect of hundreds of British soldiers who served in Northern Ireland again being brought before the court, as the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) has just said. It is wholly unacceptable that nearly half a century on, men who have served their country to the best of their ability should face possible prosecution. Does my right hon. Friend accept that it is not good enough to say that this is a matter for the Police Service of Northern Ireland? This is a matter of public policy, for which Ministers must personally be accountable.

Mike Penning: We must make sure that if the police decide—I repeat that this is for the police to decide—that they need to investigate something, they can do so. As we bring forward proposals, we will help the police, but we will also ensure that we protect as much as possible those who have served their country—alongside me and other colleagues—throughout the years.

Defence Suppliers: Innovation

3. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps is he taking to encourage innovation by defence suppliers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): With a rising defence budget and an equipment plan worth £178 billion over the next 10 years, we are renewing our capabilities. We spend up to 20% of our science and technology budget on research, and we have launched an £800 million innovation fund.

Nigel Huddleston: The Minister will be aware that the Ministry has a reputation among some suppliers of being somewhat challenging to work with. What is she doing to try to improve working relationships, particularly with small and medium-sized enterprises, including many of the defence industry suppliers in Worcestershire?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is absolutely right that it can be challenging to work with Ministry of Defence procurement processes. We are particularly keen to encourage small and medium-sized businesses to apply for business with us. We want to increase the level of our spending that we procure from small businesses from 19% to 25%. Acting on direct feedback from small businesses, we have introduced a network of supply chain advocates to help smaller businesses through the maze of defence procurement, and their contact details are available to my hon. Friend and other Members on request.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister has referred to renewing our capabilities. I have previously asked her about the programme to renew the Type 45 power and propulsion systems. I recognise that there are commercial sensitivities, but will she tell us whether there is a budget for the programme of improvements to the Type 45 power and propulsion systems, and when does she expect all six vessels to be improved?

Harriett Baldwin: I am very pleased to be able to confirm to the hon. Gentleman that there is a budget, and that progress is being made. These incredibly capable
ships are performing a wide range of tasks. For example, HMS Daring is now in the Gulf, acting as part of our deployment there.

21. [907792] Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Small firms in my constituency, such as GSI ExoTec Precision, which specialises in producing beryllium-based products, have the technology and the ideas that could help us to maintain our defence advantage. Will the Minister confirm how such firms can access the £800 million innovation fund, and when might the first competition stage start?

Harriett Baldwin: I am delighted to tell my hon. Friend that I was able to launch the first competition on Thursday at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. In the first competition—for up to £3 million—we are looking for new ways of exploring data to inform decisions. It does not sound as though that is exactly the area of specialisation with which the business my hon. Friend mentioned is engaged, but there will of course be further competitions, and applications are also open for a wide range of different ideas to be fed in directly.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): No one would deny that it is vital to do everything we can to encourage innovation in the defence sector. Does the Minister agree with me that to foster an environment in which innovation can flourish, business and industry have to be able to trust what they are told by the Government? Given that, will she take this opportunity to explain to the shipbuilding industry exactly why she did not deliver on the copper-bottomed assurances, which she gave on at least four occasions, that the national shipbuilding strategy would be published before the autumn statement?

Harriett Baldwin: Mr Speaker, did you pick up in that question any congratulations on or delight at the fact that I was at the shipyards on the Clyde on Thursday, cutting steel for two new offshore patrol vessels? I remain astonished at the very grudging way in which the Scottish National party fails to recognise the billions of pounds of work that is being sent to shipyards on the Clyde.

Brendan O’Hara: For the record, I am absolutely delighted that the OPVs are being built on the Clyde. Will the Minister take this opportunity to apologise to workers and management across the UK shipbuilding industry for the misleading and contradictory statements that have come from the Ministry of Defence during the past few months? Will she also take this opportunity to explain why the shipbuilding strategy did not appear when she promised it would appear?

Harriett Baldwin: It is lucky the hon. Gentleman gets a supplementary, so that he can say some vague, grudging words of welcome for the fact that we have just announced two decades’ worth of work on the Type 26 frigates in Scotland. He is complaining about the lack of publication of a report that has been published; the Government will provide their response next year. [Interruption.] Sir John Parker’s report on shipbuilding was published on 29 November. I am sorry the hon. Gentleman has not had a chance to read it, and will send him a personally signed copy.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a very excitable burgher of this House. I am not sure that he has quite attained the apogee of statesmanship to which he should aspire. He must try to calm himself and take some sort of soothing medicament. That will probably do the trick. Let us hear from a calm person. I call Maria Miller.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The Minister’s focus on innovation is absolutely right. Will she look at the excellent work of the National Aerospace Technology Exploitation Programme, which is already running more than 100 innovation projects, and establish how she can help to continue that work?

Harriett Baldwin: Mr Speaker, you were absolutely right to call my right hon. Friend, who has asked such a calm and helpful question about the excellent work of that organisation. She also will be familiar with the work of the Defence Growth Partnership at Farnborough and the fantastic way in which it works to promote the excellence of the UK aerospace industry to people all around the world.

RAF Operations: Iraq and Syria

4. Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the effectiveness of the RAF’s military operations in Iraq and Syria.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): The Royal Air Force has made a vital contribution to the counter-Daesh coalition, carrying out 1,092 strikes in Iraq and 75 in Syria, and providing essential intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. In Iraq, the RAF has helped Iraqi security forces reclaim significant territory, including supporting operations to liberate Mosul. In Syria, the RAF has already attacked Daesh’s capital in Raqqa while supporting opposition groups pushing back Daesh on the ground.

Bridget Phillipson: The RAF is making real progress in tackling Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and our thoughts at this time of year must be with our brave servicemen and women. Once Mosul has been liberated by the Iraqi Government what role does the Secretary of State anticipate for the RAF in Iraq?

Sir Michael Fallon: We shall be reviewing progress in Iraq and Syria with the military commanders at the counter-Daesh coalition meeting in London on Thursday, and will map out a road to longer-term peace in Iraq, including potential future deployments in different parts of Iraq that may help to continue the training we have been offering Iraqi forces, and further work on counter-terrorism. We will also discuss the need to control the spread of the return of foreign fighters from Iraq and Syria to the different countries that they came from.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): At a time when our RAF is at full stretch on operations, the Secretary of State will be as concerned as I was to hear the announcement that RAF Halton is to close, not because the long-term defence estate consolidation is not the right direction of travel, but because the closure seems to have been sprung on the civilian and
military personnel in order to meet the local council land bank deadline. Will he reassure personnel about timescale and staff support so that the decision does not create a serious retention risk?

Mr Speaker: Notably in relation to operations in Iraq and Syria, to which I am sure the hon. Lady intended to allude but did not quite get round to doing so.

Sir Michael Fallon: Decisions on closing some of the bases and airfields that we no longer need have been taken on the basis of military capability and on the advice of service chiefs. I am sure that the whole House will join my hon. Friend, and indeed the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), in paying tribute to the work of the RAF—both the sustained tempo of its operations, which is probably at its highest for more than 25 years, and the enormous job it is doing to keep our country safe.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): May I press the Defence Secretary on the level of defeatism in his statement that it is nearly impossible to envisage successful airdrops if Russia does not allow them? For all its belligerence, Russia does not want to trigger a conflict with the UK and our NATO allies. The longer that that cowardice, in essence, goes on in the face of Russia’s posturing, the more Russia will push and the harder it will be for any resolution to come to the dreadful tragedy happening in Syria.

Sir Michael Fallon: We continue to consider all possibilities for getting either food or medicine into Aleppo, or indeed some of the other besieged areas, but it is not simply a question of Russian permission; we would also have to make sure that any drops were feasible, considering the vulnerability of aircraft to ground-to-air defence systems.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State said that it was very late for the people of eastern Aleppo, but it is not too late, and I would second the calls for airdrops. RAF planes could be flying over and providing humanitarian airdrops. Some 200 Members on both sides of the House, including Front-Benchers and Back-Benchers in the Labour party, have signed a letter calling for airdrops. Leading humanitarian organisations have done likewise. Will he look at it again?

Sir Michael Fallon: We continue to look, almost daily, at the various ways we might get food aid in, but it is not possible, in a contested airspace, with ground-to-air missile systems and Russian aircraft flying overhead, denying permission, to fly coalition aircraft over Aleppo. Without that security, we cannot drop food where it is most needed, but we continue to look at all the options.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his answer on Aleppo to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), and I recognise the RAF capabilities that he mentioned, but I share the concerns raised by my hon. Friend the Members for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) that we really need to look at this again. Will the Secretary of State continue to look—and not at any stage give up looking—for a way to alleviate the terrible suffering in east Aleppo?

Sir Michael Fallon: I can give the hon. Lady that assurance. We continue to look at these options and to talk to non-governmental organisations willing to help us provide food and medicine. Some food and medicine is getting into other cities in Syria, but it is not getting into Aleppo itself, simply because of the impossibility of flying aircraft in the airspace over Aleppo and the very real risk of aircraft being shot down.

Apprenticeships

6. Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): What support the armed forces provide to apprenticeships?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The armed forces are Britain’s biggest provider of apprenticeships. We have around 20,000 apprentices on programmes at any one time, ranging from engineering and IT to construction and driving. Defence has pledged to start 50,000 apprenticeships during this Parliament and will seize the new Treasury co-investment opportunity to work with the Department for Education, expanding and improving the current range of apprenticeships we offer.

Rebecca Harris: That is indeed impressive. I was expecting a good reply but not to find out that the armed forces were the largest provider in the country. What assurance can the Minister give those residents of mine who might want to take up an apprenticeship with the Ministry of Defence that they offer quality as well as quantity?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend is right to focus on quality, and I am delighted to say that following the last Ofsted inspections both the Army and the naval service were graded as “good”, with some individual programmes being graded as “outstanding”, while the RAF’s programme was graded as “outstanding”.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the Department for Education, and the Government website refers to England, so will he assure me that apprenticeships are available throughout the UK for people in the devolved regions where apprenticeships are a devolved matter to the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly or the Welsh Assembly?

Mark Lancaster: Of course, we are always happy to work with devolved Assemblies, and I can absolutely reassure the right hon. Gentleman that apprenticeships are available to all our armed forces personnel.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to my constituency on Friday to open the Type 26 facility at David Brown Santasalo, the gear manufacturer, where he met and spoke to some of its many young apprentices. Will he and his Ministers continue to make sure that quality apprenticeships are a key part of the defence supply chain?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Indeed, I understand that the visit was a great success. Absolutely, as we look to the future, this is not just about apprenticeships in the armed forces, but about the transition for service personnel when they leave.
We have a duty to prepare them for work potentially in the supply chain after their service. After all, this is a partnership with industry.

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): This time last week, the SNP’s defence team visited BAE Systems on the Clyde and talked to apprentices about their future. What reassurances can the Government give to these skilled young men and women who are waiting to hear if the promised Type 31s will be built entirely on the Clyde?

**Mark Lancaster:** It is worth remembering that the apprentice who will work on the last Type 26 is yet to be born, but we continue to work closely with industry. As the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), said just a few moments ago, the investment made in Scotland for many years to come should be celebrated.

**Battle Tanks**

7. **Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): For what reasons his Department plans to reduce the Army’s number of main battle tanks.

**The Minister for the Armed Forces** (Mike Penning): The strategic defence and security review 2015 committed us to a more adaptive force to meet the range of future threats. This means having the best mix of Challenger 2 tanks and the new Ajax multi-purpose armoured vehicles to deliver the Army’s contribution to future threats. We are planning to spend £700 million to extend the Challenger 2 capability out to 2035.

**Dr Lewis:** I thank the Minister for that answer. While we should warmly welcome the very large order for Ajax fighting vehicles, does he accept that these will be no match for the armour and the armament of enemy main battle tanks? Will he therefore confirm how many of our existing 227 tanks will go forward to the Challenger 2 life extension programme, bearing in mind the need to have capacity for regenerations in the event of a crisis?

**Mike Penning:** My right hon. Friend is the Chair of the Defence Committee and has taken a keen interest in defence matters for so many years. He knows very well that it is for the military to decide exactly what the capabilities are, but having £700 million available for Challenger 2 going forward to 2035 shows a clear commitment to Challenger.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): While I support having a diversity of vehicles available, there are reports that the Army is planning to reduce its number of tanks by a third. At a time when Russia has announced a new generation of vehicles, ours will reduce from 227 to 170. Does the Minister agree that now is not the right time for this sort of announcement to be made, because it sends out completely the wrong message about our defence?

**Mike Penning:** We should not believe everything we read in the press—as a former journalist, I might have written it in the past. We need to trust the armed forces to tell us exactly what they want. The Russian Armata tank, which I think is what the hon. Gentleman is alluding to, is an unmanned vehicle. We are making sure that innovation and adaptation is there. I would have thought that we would hear more cheers from Labour Members, particularly those in Wales, about the fact that the Ajax vehicle is going to be built in Wales.

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Minister mentions the Ajax vehicle. When David Cameron was Prime Minister, he announced that the new Ajax fighting vehicle would be a “boost for British manufacturing”. While I welcome the fact that many of the vehicles will be assembled in Merthyr Tydfil, they are being built using Swedish steel and will have their hulls built in Spain—and some are to be completely built in Spain. Does the Minister accept that Mr David Cameron was somewhat inaccurate in his statement?

**Mike Penning:** No, I do not think so. The issue is about jobs in Wales, which are coming to Merthyr Tydfil, and making sure that the Army has the vehicle it wants. That is what this Government are going to guarantee. Unless the Labour party commits to spending 2% of GDP on defence, they are never going to reach this sort of expenditure.

**NATO**

10. **Mr Dominic Raab** (Esher and Walton) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen the UK’s commitment to NATO.

**The Minister for the Armed Forces** (Mike Penning): Next year, we are sending nearly 800 troops to Estonia and 150 personnel of the Light Dragoons to Poland. We are leading the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, and undertaking air policing, based in Romania, with the four Typhoons we are committing to NATO.

**Mr Raab:** I welcome the Government’s commitment, particularly to the Polish Prime Minister last month, of additional UK troops and armoured vehicles in the face of concerns about the Russian threat. Does the Minister agree that we should stand shoulder to shoulder with our Polish friends, and that this shows how Britain can be an even stronger European ally—irrespective of Brexit?

**Mike Penning:** On behalf of the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, I had extensive talks with the Polish Defence Minister and his colleagues, who were thrilled that we were committed to being with them, which is what came out from the statement afterwards. The Light Dragoons, which will have their Jackals in Poland, are really looking forward to going there as well.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): On the day we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the end of the USSR, can we do more to educate our people about the importance of defending the security of the states—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—that regained their independence and were able to make a free, democratic decision to associate with NATO, and to end the nonsense we hear in some quarters, perhaps on both sides of the Atlantic, that NATO is not a voluntary alliance?
Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab) is as interested in hearing other contributions on his question as he was in hearing his own views. It is customary for colleagues to remain until the end of the exchanges on their own question, which does not seem unreasonable.

Mike Penning: The whole success of NATO lies in the fact that countries join freely. The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) is right that the countries he mentioned—Latvia, Estonia and so on—are particularly worried about their protection. It is not like the British Army of the Rhine, which I had the honour and privilege to serve with and which sat there, static, for long periods; what we and our allies in NATO are sending is a significant force to make sure the Russians know that we are serious.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Part of the strength of any alliance is sometimes being a critical friend of other members of that alliance. Will the Minister, on behalf of the Secretary of State, assure me that the next time they speak to the future leader of the Minister, on behalf of the Secretary of State, assure me that the next time they speak to the future leader of the free world, they might request that he starts reading his CIA briefings daily and so does us all a favour?

Mike Penning: I am sure that the future President of the United States will read the CIA briefings when he becomes the President of the United States. I am sure the hon. Gentleman saw this morning’s press coverage showing that the future President of the United States does not believe everything that he is told by the press.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The additional support to NATO is welcome, but for our land forces that requires high-end armoured formations. Will the MOD be making new money available to properly regrow and train with that capability?

Mike Penning: The armed forces, particularly the Army, have the money they require. Only recently, I visited the Light Dragoons and the Rifles, which will be deploying to Poland. The equipment they have is second to none, but we will keep their equipment under review, to make sure it is fit for purpose, particularly in view of the inclement weather in Poland.

Royal Navy

11. Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the size and power of the Royal Navy.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Will the new Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships be built in the UK? If so, will the right hon. Gentleman give a further commitment to buying British in defence procurement, and guarantee the use of British steel to build those ships?

Mike Penning: What we will commit to is the new frigates that will replace the Type 23s. Having been on a Type 23 only in the past couple of weeks, when we were shadowing the Russian aircraft carrier in the English channel, I know we must not underestimate the capabilities of the Type 23s, not least because many other countries are looking to purchase them when we can sell them off. At the end of the day, the Type 23s are doing a fantastic job, and we will make sure that the new frigates do just as well.

Mike Penning: Importantly, last week’s report stated that what we needed to achieve was the best value for the Navy. We must make sure that shipyards bid for the work—previously, they have not done so. Let us see what bids come forward and who wins.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): When does my right hon. Friend expect to be able to announce the basing and maintenance options for the Type 26 and Type 23 frigates? Will he confirm that Portsmouth is being considered for at least some of those welcome new ships?

Mike Penning: Of course we recognise that bids are coming in. As soon as the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), who is responsible for defence procurement, has the ability to make that announcement, I am sure she will do so. We are looking forward to the new frigates, not least because, as I said earlier, we can sell off the Type 23s to countries that particularly want them.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Today I received my first Christmas present: a Royal Navy calendar. [Interruption.] A calendar showing platforms, obviously. January features HMS Ocean. Can the Minister inform us how its decommissioning in the next 18 months, after years of impressive service, adds to the strength and power of our Royal Navy?

Mike Penning: While procurement does not fall within my bailiwick, I am reliably informed that HMS Ocean was always due to go out of service in 2018, and at the same time the new Elizabeth class carriers will come into force. She has done fantastic work, and we must praise the work the ship and, most importantly, her crew have done over the years, but her time is coming towards its end and she will go in 2018.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Well, I have to say that the answer from the Minister for defence procurement, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) on the publication of the national shipbuilding strategy is simply not good enough—not good enough for our Royal Navy, not good enough for workers in our shipbuilding industries, and not good enough for our international allies. The fact is that on
29 November the Government only published Sir John Parker’s independent review to inform the strategy, when just last year the Government promised to “publish a new national shipbuilding strategy in 2016”.

With just six parliamentary days left until the end of the year, will the Minister tell us exactly when we are going to see that strategy?

Mike Penning: We will see it in spring 2017, but I do find it slightly difficult to be lectured on defence procurement by a party that will not even commit itself to 2% of GDP. The key to this is making sure that we get the ships built in the shipyards, that we get the apprentices we need, and that the whole community benefits from it.

Nia Griffith: I do not know where the Minister gets his information from; I do not know whether he reads Westminster Hall debates, and I do not know if he has been listening to what we have been saying very clearly from this Dispatch Box, but we are fully committed to a 2% spend of GDP to meet our NATO commitments and to spend it on defence, as is required.

May we now turn to a more specific issue to do with the naval fleet, and in particular the Type 26 frigates, which have faced very long delays with all the attendant risks to our naval capabilities? The Defence Committee recently said that the national shipbuilding strategy “must include strict timelines for the delivery of the new Type 26 class of frigates and an indicative timeframe for the General Purpose Frigate.”

Will the Minister confirm that when we see this in the spring, it really will include those details?

Mike Penning: I did a little bit of research and it appears that the Labour Government started looking at Type 26s in 1997; they had 13 further years in government, yet it will be us who will be cutting steel, in spring next year.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I think we will hear the voice of Gainsborough on this matter.

15. [907786] Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): With increasing demands for frigates worldwide, does my right hon. Friend agree with Sir John Parker that we should focus on building ships that other countries actually want to buy, something the Royal Navy has signally failed to do in the past?

Mike Penning: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head: the Type 26 is not just for our Navy, but is for our allies around the world as well. It will be exactly the type of ship that will replace the 26 around the world if we get the build right and actually get it out there, which is something the previous Administration forgot to do.

Daesh

12. Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of progress in the military campaign against Daesh.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): In Iraq, operations to liberate Mosul are progressing, with Iraqi security forces reclaiming increasing areas of eastern Mosul. Many of those involved in the operation are among more than 31,000 Iraqi troops trained by the UK in counter-IED, engineering and medical skills. In Syria, coalition support has helped push Daesh back from the Turkish border and is now taking the fight to Daesh’s heartland, with the move on Raqqa.

Stephen Hammond: When my right hon. Friend meets many of his counterparts later this week, will he confirm that he will focus the discussion on how the threat of Daesh can be defeated, particularly in Iraq?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes, we will be reviewing the military progress being made, which is substantial in Iraq: Daesh has less than 10% of Iraq now. We will also be mapping out the long-term plan to bring peace and stability, in particular to western Iraq. We will be working, too, as a coalition to monitor the dispersal of Daesh fighters from Iraq who may be moving to other theatres.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Does Daesh’s move into Palmyra this week not show that there is a lack of a coherent strategy? In our debate on airstrikes 12 months ago, Members argued that more boots on the ground were required. Should not the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister argue strongly for that in the United Nations? Otherwise, the slaughter of countless innocent individuals, which we have seen in the last 12 months, will just go on and on.

Sir Michael Fallon: Well, there is no support at the United Nations for the deployment of UN troops in Syria, and there may not be support in this House for the deployment of British troops on the ground in combat in Syria. Our role has been to provide the intelligence gathering from the air and the airstrikes on the ground. I can tell the House that the second front has begun to be opened up now, with a move by the Syrian Democratic Forces towards Raqqa, which is in effect the capital of the caliphate. That began at the end of last week.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How many fighters originating from the UK have been killed in the various regions? How many remain and how many have returned to the UK?

Sir Michael Fallon: If I may, I will write to my right hon. Friend with the exact numbers involved, but we believe that several hundred British fighters remain in either Iraq or Syria. Altogether there are many thousand foreign fighters from western Europe and further afield. One of the issues we will consider this week is how we properly monitor their dispersal either to other theatres or back to our respective countries, and how those who have fought for a proscribed organisation such as Daesh can be properly brought to justice.

Sir Desmond Swayne: There is no need to write.

Mr Speaker: That is very generous-spirited of the right hon. Gentleman.

Armed Forces: Equipment

14. Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): What plans he has to invest in equipment for the armed forces until 2020.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): The Government are committed to increasing the defence budget by 0.5% a year in real terms, as well as increasing our equipment budget by 1% above inflation each year until 2020. Put simply, that means more ships, more planes and an increase in cutting-edge equipment for our Special Forces.

Mr Speaker: One of the great merits of having the Clerk in front of me is that I am on the receiving end of his specialist advice. May I say, for the benefit both of the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), who takes an interest in these matters, I know, and of the House, that the letter to which reference was made is strictly speaking a letter to the House and for its benefit? Notwithstanding the motivation of the right hon. Gentleman in saying, “You need not write,” may I with the greatest respect say to the right hon. Gentleman, a distinguished former Minister, that that is not for him to judge—the letter is for the House’s benefit. He may be disinterested in it, but others may be interested. We will leave it there.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): How will we get to see it?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman chunters from a sedentary position, “How will we see it?” Toddle along to the Library and you will find it, man.

Edward Argar: Will my hon. Friend the Minister reassure me that we will continue to provide our armed forces with the best possible equipment and that, where appropriate and where that standard is met, that will be equipment developed and manufactured in the UK?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is right that we need to focus on the best equipment and getting the right capability for our armed forces. We will also always seek the best value for money for the taxpayer, but we will seek to get that UK content as strong as possible. The F-35 is an example. Fifteen per cent. of each of the 3,000 planes in the global programme are made at Warton in the north-west, and the UK has been selected as the global hub for a large number of elements for the maintenance, repair, overhaul and upgrade of those fantastic aircraft.

Topical Questions

T1. [907796] Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): Our priorities remain success in our operations against Daesh and implementing our strategic defence and security review. As I have told the House, on Thursday I will chair the next meeting of Defence Ministers from across the coalition against Daesh, reviewing progress in Iraq and now in Syria and mapping out longer-term plans for peace and stability in the region.

Andrew Stephenson: On Saturday, I visited my constituent, 27-year-old father of two, Shahbaz Saleem, a brave RAF serviceman who has dedicated the past 10 years of his life to the RAF, but tragically is now in Pendleside hospice with terminal bowel cancer. Despite that devastating diagnosis, he has taken on another challenge: he has raised over £15,000 so far for the hospice. Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to Shahbaz for his service in the RAF and for raising so much money for that very worthwhile cause?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am very happy to pay that tribute. Senior Aircraftman Saleem is an airman of the highest calibre who has supported our operations in Afghanistan and, indeed, in Libya. His wife and young daughter should be in no doubt about the highest regard in which the Royal Air Force holds him. We are all impressed and inspired by the courage that he has shown from his sickbed in raising so much money for Pendleside hospice.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Following the Government’s announcement of base closures, what guarantees has the Ministry of Defence given to civilian staff regarding their future employment?

Sir Michael Fallon: As the hon. Gentleman knows and, I think, supported at the time, we have had to reduce the number of bases to ensure that our servicemen and women are in better accommodation in fewer remote areas, and in places where their spouses and partners have more chance of getting into employment. Obviously, civilian jobs may be affected. We have plenty of time. We have set out the generous timescales for discussion. The moves are not immediate and we will certainly do everything we can to ensure that those civilians are properly looked after.

T4. [907799] Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to increase Britain’s defence representation around the world, to promote our security and prosperity?

Sir Michael Fallon: This year we have established regional defence staffs in the Gulf, based in Dubai; in Asia-Pacific, based in Singapore; and in Africa, based in Abuja. That fulfils the defence engagement commitment that we made in the strategic defence review last year. The new regional defence staffs will work with our international partners to protect and advance our interests by reinforcing bilateral and multilateral defence relationships.

T2. [907797] Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I welcome the role that UK forces will play in Estonia as part of NATO’s forward presence. It is vital that we provide reassurance in facing the threat from Russia. What further steps will we take to bolster security in the Baltic states and in Poland?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning): Our allies in NATO look very carefully at what we can do and where we can do it. Other nations are also joining in. The French are coming with us into Estonia, with 200 troops in the first six-month tranche. As I said in response to an earlier question, as a coalition we will look carefully at what capabilities we need and where we need them, and we will step up to the mark as we always do.

T5. [907800] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend able to offer any hope that 2017 will be a better year for soldiers who either have been or
are being investigated for decisions taken in the heat of battle, particularly Royal Marine Sergeant Blackman, who faces another Christmas in jail.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The Ministry of Defence has co-operated with the legal process and will continue to do so. Now that that case has moved to the court martial appeal court, it would be inappropriate to comment.

T3. [907798] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): What assessment have the Government made of the threat of the use of tactical nuclear weapons by Russia, and what action is Britain taking with NATO allies to resist it?

Sir Michael Fallon: Russia has chosen to deploy Iskander missiles in the Kaliningrad area that it controls. Part of the purpose of our deployment next year of troops to Estonia and Poland, and of RAF Typhoons down to Romania, is to reassure our allies that we all in NATO absolutely stand by the right to collective defence. We will continue not only to reassure, but to make it very clear to Russia that we will come to the aid of any member state that is attacked.

T8. [907804] Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): As we approach Christmas, a time that many members of our armed forces will spend away from their families, will my right hon. Friend meet me in thanking them and their families for all that they do to protect us in this country and for the sacrifices they all make?

Mike Penning: As the Minister for the Armed Forces, or for ops, it is very appropriate for me to ask the House to join me in wishing everyone in our armed forces, and their families and loved ones, a very merry Christmas. We all hope that they will come home safe.

Mr Speaker: A very good croak indeed in the circumstances.

Sir Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend will have noted the leader of the Labour party’s call for a demilitarised zone between NATO and Russia. It will be interesting to hear at some point whether the rest of the Labour party agrees with that, because President Putin certainly would.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): The unit cost of the five P-8 Poseidon aircraft that Norway is buying is $300 million, including the data uplink. After the Brexit devaluation, the unit cost of the nine P-8s that the UK is buying is nearer to $400 million dollars. Does the Minister call that value for money?

Harriett Baldwin: I am not quite sure of the hon. Gentleman’s exact point, because if it were up to him and his party, we would not be buying P-8s or basing them in Scotland.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Will my hon. Friend meet me in obtaining Department for Communities and Local Government sponsorship for the lion’s share of the £1 billion for the iAero innovation hub in Yeovil? Rapid innovation in unmanned aerial vehicles could help the MOD to deliver aid and support our military.

Harriett Baldwin: I thank my hon. Friend for his tireless campaigning on behalf of the excellent work done in his constituency on interesting, innovative projects, such as the unmanned helicopter system. We have committed to spend some £3 billion with Leonardo over the next 10 years as part of our long-term partnering arrangement.
Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The Israeli and US navies have recently been attacked with anti-ship missiles by Hezbollah and the Houthis. Is it not time to look again at the River-class offshore patrol vehicles and the Type 31 frigate to ensure that they have ASAM capability?

Harriett Baldwin: It is important that the Royal Navy continually assesses the capabilities with which ships are fitted. I cannot go into some sensitive details at the Dispatch Box owing to operational requirements.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The UK’s frigates and destroyers are currently protected with Harpoon missiles with a range of 80 miles. Those missiles will be coming out of service in 2018, leaving our frigates and destroyers defended by Mark 8 guns with a range of 17 miles and, from 2020, Sea Venom missiles with a range of just 11 miles. Will the Minister reconsider extending the service life of the Harpoon missiles to ensure that our ships are properly defended?

Harriett Baldwin: The Royal Navy is, of course, continuously assessing the capabilities it requires, and work is ongoing across the Department to consider the options for the Harpoon replacement.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Thanks to the Cluster Munitions (Prohibitions) Act 2010, brought in by the Labour Government, we do not use or sell cluster munitions any more, but the Government are also required under the Act to persuade their allies not to use cluster munitions either. What are the Government doing to try to stop the Saudis from using cluster munitions in Yemen?

Harriett Baldwin: In line with our obligations under the cluster munitions convention, we continue actively to discourage all states that are not party to the convention from using cluster munitions and we encourage them to accede to it without delay. We have raised the issue of ratification of the convention at ministerial level with Saudi Arabia.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I was disappointed to learn of staff reductions at BAE Systems, including at the site in my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend outline what support his Department can offer to our local suppliers to ensure that the skills behind the innovation are secured in my constituency?

Harriett Baldwin: I share my hon. Friend’s disappointment at the news that BAE Systems is reducing staff. However, I can tell him that the budget is in place, the contract will be competed for in the normal way, and that ongoing improvements are being made—as they have been made—all the time to that power and propulsion system.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, the good doctor—the Chair of the Select Committee no less: Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Do Ministers accept that the Type 31 general purpose frigates are the only chance we will have for a generation to raise the number of escorts from the pathetic total of 19 back to the sort of figures we used to have when we really had an ocean-going Navy with enough escorts to protect it? Will the Minister therefore ensure that the design of these frigates is chosen to be of the most economical nature? All the bells and whistles can be added later but the maximum number of hulls must be commissioned.

Sir Michael Fallon: I say to the Chairman of the Committee that we have some 29 ships serving on the seven seas around the world at the moment, and I am sure that that has his support. He makes a very good point about the exportability of the Type 31 frigate, and our ambition to raise the number of frigates and destroyers above the current 19.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Exceptionally, as I understand that it flows in some way legitimately from the exchanges that have already taken place, I will hear the point of order now. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will not abuse his privilege.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. During Defence questions, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), advised that the shipbuilding strategy had been published and said she would send a signed copy to my delighted friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara). Yet, when cross-examined by the shadow Defence Secretary, the Minister for the Armed Forces stated that publication would take place in spring 2017. Will the Secretary of State now answer the question: which one is it?

Sir Michael Fallon rose—

Mr Speaker: No response from the Secretary of State is required. The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) had, a moment ago, a beaming countenance, as he obviously felt he had unearthed a crucial nugget. If he is satisfied with his prodigious efforts, I am glad to bring a little happiness into his life. We will leave it there for now.
NEW MEMBER

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

Dr Caroline Elizabeth Johnson, for Sleaford and North Hykeham.

Social Care Funding

3.41 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the crisis in funding in social care, and the effect it is having on the NHS and on the care of vulnerable older people.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): I thank the hon. Lady for raising today’s question. All Members of this House will agree that there are few areas of domestic policy that touch on so many lives and that are so important to so many of our constituents.

I wish to start by acknowledging the work of more than 1.4 million professional carers, the vast majority of whom provide excellent, compassionate care. I also wish to acknowledge the 6 million informal carers who also do so much.

Spending on long-term care in our country is more than the OECD average—in particular, it is more than comparable economies such as France and Germany. Nevertheless, I accept that our system is under strain, and that pressure has been building for some years now.

The Government response has been to ensure that councils have access to funding to increase social care spend by the end of this Parliament. We estimate that the increase could be around 5% in real terms. Additional funding comes from the better care fund, the additional better care fund and changes to the precept.

Another response has been to put into place and enforce a robust regulatory system. Between 2014 and early next year, all homes and domiciliary providers will have been re-inspected. Seventy-two per cent are classified by the Care Quality Commission as good or outstanding. Where homes are inadequate, powers now exist to ensure improvement or force closure. Those powers are being used.

Another Government response has been to work with local authorities to ensure that a continuing market exists. In the past six years, the total number of beds has remained constant, and there are 40% more domiciliary care agencies now than in 2010. Finally, the Government have responded by driving further and faster the integration of the care and health systems. We have seen that those councils that do that best demonstrate far fewer delayed transfers than those who adopt best practice more slowly.

Any system would benefit from higher budgets, and social care is no exception—but quality matters too. Today is not a budget statement or a local government settlement. I wish to end by commending again the many hundreds of thousands of carers who work hard to make the current system work for so many.

Barbara Keeley: That was a disappointment. Before the autumn statement, we debated the funding crisis in social care—it is not a strain but a crisis—and the serious concerns expressed by local government health and clinical leaders. We on the Labour Benches called on the Government urgently to bring forward promised funding to address that crisis. The Chancellor did not listen and did not bring forward any funding for social care—he did not even mention it. Will the Minister tell...
us in his response why Health Ministers do not stand up for vulnerable and older people in this country and fight harder to get extra vital funding for social care?

Over 1 million older people in this country have unmet care needs, 400,000 fewer people have publicly funded care than did so in 2010 and, as he recognises, a heavier burden now falls on unpaid family carers. The crisis in social care has been made by this Government as a result of £5 billion being cut from adult social care budgets. Can the Minister confirm what is reported by *The Times*—that the Government intend to dump this funding crisis on local councils and council tax payers by increasing the social care precept?

The King’s Fund has called that proposal “deeply flawed” because local councils in the least deprived areas would be able to raise more than twice as much as those in the most deprived areas. This year that means that the precept raises £15 per head of the adult population in Richmond, but only £5 per head in Newham and Manchester. That would widen inequality of access to social care across the country. Is it the care Minister’s intention to support a solution that widens inequality of access and denies social care to hundreds and thousands of vulnerable older people?

**David Mowat:** The hon. Lady fought the last election on a manifesto that said not one penny more for local government spending. She is against the change to the precept that we brought in in the spending review. She talked this morning about being against taxpayers and council tax payers having to meet the cost of increased social care. That raises the question who she thinks should be paying for it. Is it borrowing, or is it the magic money tree? She said that the precept increases inequalities because some councils are able to raise more than others from it. That would be true, if it were not for the fact that the additional better care fund is distributed in a way that balances that. That is precisely what we do.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I should advise the House that there are three urgent questions to be taken today and I want all to be properly contributed to, but it is important that we also provide time for subsequent business, so I will want to ensure that concerns are taken seriously?

**David Mowat:** I do agree. I had a discussion with the Chancellor, calling for extra money not for the NHS, but particularly for the capital budget and social care, because the back pressure from social care is what is causing the NHS to struggle. I totally agree with the Minister as regards integration. In Scotland, where we have the integrated joint boards, it has brought a change more quickly than we would have hoped. Our delayed discharges are down 9% in a year; in England they are up more than 30%. But this is not easy and it needs to be funded. We have debated the sustainability and transformation plans, which could be the basis for the future integration of the NHS, but all we hear within those plans is community hospitals being shut, losing the opportunity to have step-up and step-down beds, A&E departments being shut, and beds within hospitals being shut. This is the wrong way round. STPs could work, but they cannot start with the number they must reach—they have to design themselves around a service that keeps patients at home and keeps them well.

**David Mowat:** The hon. Lady made two points, both of which I agree with. The first was that in Scotland there has been a 9% reduction in delayed transfers of care. It is also true that in England many parts of our system, particularly those that have integrated most quickly, have achieved reductions of that size and more. She is right that the STPs are part of the process of re-engineering the system. Adult social care and the integration of adult social care are a big part of that and we need to ensure that we deliver.

**Jo Churchill:** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Does the Minister agree that better integration could be driven by better patient data, which could help to show us where quality practices exist and how to spread best practice?

**David Mowat:** I do agree. I had a discussion with the Care Quality Commission on the dataset that is reported, and I hope that over the next months and years we can improve how we do that.

**Dame Rosie Winterton** (Doncaster Central) (Lab): I think that the Minister completely missed the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) from the Front Bench about the unfairness of asking councils to deal with the problem. A 1% rise in council tax in Doncaster raises 21% less than would the same rise in a council in the Prime Minister’s constituency. Does that not mean that the problem is being pushed on to the areas that can least afford it?

**David Mowat:** The right hon. Lady would be right that I had missed the point, but I have not said that that issue is addressed by how we distribute the additional better care funding, which uses a formula that takes into account relative need.

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Minister will know that following recent events I have taken a particular interest in this issue. Does he agree that saying that it is just about money is too simplistic, and we see a wide variety of the quality of care from homes with the same funding packages? Does he also agree that we need to improve the inspection regime to ensure that concerns are taken seriously?
David Mowat: I agree and I commend my hon. Friend for his work on the Morleigh homes in his constituency, which had significant issues and have now been substantially closed down. He is right that the issues there were not principally about money; they were about quality and about people doing their jobs properly.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the Minister share the view of the CQC that the system is close to tipping point, and does he understand the impact that has on many frail elderly people? Does he not agree that now is the time to bury our differences and work together to come up with a long-term settlement for the health and care system?

David Mowat: Today is not the day on which to announce a royal commission on the funding of care in the future, but I do agree that it is important that we put care funding on to a better structural footing for the future. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I applaud the Government’s commitment to £10 billion to the NHS by 2020, but does my hon. Friend agree that social care and healthcare must be better integrated across the whole country? Somerset County Council’s sustainability and transformation plan has that at its heart. It is a good model. Does my hon. Friend agree that such models should be copied, but that councils must be given the tools?

David Mowat: The STP for Somerset is excellent in that regard and my hon. Friend is right to raise it. She is also right to emphasise again the integration of health and social care, which is the holy grail of this. Those councils and health systems that do it best are making a huge difference.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): But is the Minister aware that in the course of the past few years local authorities—let us say in Derbyshire—have lost more than £200 million from cuts promulgated by the Government? On top of that, they are closing community hospitals in Derbyshire, including Bolsover, with a total of more than 100 beds between them. Does it make sense when those community hospitals bear the burden of looking after people who cannot occupy other hospital beds?

David Mowat: The hon. Gentleman is right that there have been changes to the funding regime, but councils such as Knowsley and St Helens have virtually no delayed transfers of care and they have the same budget issues as his council.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): An ageing population, the welcome introduction of the national living wage and the rightly greater expectations on services provided are causing exponential growth in adult social care costs, to a far greater amount than can simply be found through efficiency savings. Although the council tax cap has delivered financial discipline, we need to do everything we can, working with the CQC, to ensure that it is eliminated.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Does the Minister not realise that his statement today is totally inadequate for the crisis in social care and that the complacency he shows is totally unrealistic, given what has happened in the country? What we require is a very different response from what we have been given today.

David Mowat: I am tempted just to say, “No, I don’t acknowledge that,” but I make the point again that I am not complacent. We understand that the system is under pressure, and we acknowledge and accept that. That is not the same as saying that there are not things that we can do in terms of quality provision to manage better, and that is what we are trying to do.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Adult social care accounts for about 45% of Lancashire County Council’s budget, and that is a growing share. The key to addressing this challenge will be the better integration of health and social care to better manage demand. What funding is being provided to Lancashire County Council to allow that transformation to take place?

David Mowat: The better care fund is predicated on the assumption that we will drive that integration. I also make the point that not just Leicester, for example, but many councils right across the country—something like 40%—have increased, and will increase, their social care budget in real terms next year.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): By 2020, we will see a national shortfall of £2.6 billion in adult social care funding. If the Government are forcing councils to increase council tax, what percentage will they be expected to increase it by? How much of that...
percentage increase would go solely to adult social care services? How will the Government ensure that that happens?

David Mowat: The spending review increased the precept by 2%—that is what we brought in at that time. As I said earlier, this is not the local government settlement, and I have nothing to say on council tax.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Many people on, I think, both sides of the House feel that the social care system is broken because we have councils and the health service involved. Would it not be a good idea for the Secretary of State or the Minister to work with Members on both sides of the House, with good will on both sides, rather than for us to have this petty point-scoring from the Opposition? [Interruption.]

No, this is much more serious than politics—we have to get this right for future generations. Should we not work together and come up with a solution that both sides of the House can agree on?

David Mowat: My hon. Friend is right that this whole system is more important than politics: there is nothing more important to more people—and more old people in terms of the dignity and quality of their lives—than getting this right, and it is essential that we do that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call an Eagle—Maria Eagle.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Liverpool City Council has seen £330 million cut from its budget since 2010—58% of all its money. A further £90 million has to be found by 2020. In those circumstances, how will it be possible for the council to increase, as we all wish it could, the money it spends on adult social services, when it already spends more on them—£146 million—than it can raise in council tax?

David Mowat: It is not my role to lecture Liverpool City Council on how to deliver adult social care. I make the point, though, that Knowsley and St Helens, which are very close to Liverpool, have virtually no delayed transfers of care, and so possibly some best-practice sharing would be in order.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I do not want to see a festering sibling rivalry. Angela Eagle.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think it is right that you chose the younger before the older this time, because you did the opposite last time.

In the Wirral we have an above-average number of older people, yet we have a very low council tax base, which means that we cannot raise enough money through council tax to deal with the shortfalls in adult social care. As the Minister knows, £5 billion has been cut from social care since 2010, and his better care budget is £3.5 billion, so there are huge issues here. Why was this not mentioned in the autumn statement, and what is the Government’s response to this ongoing crisis?

David Mowat: I have made the point already, and I will make it again, that we acknowledge that the precept is uneven in the way that it was announced in the spending review. That is why the additional better care fund component is allocated on a basis that remedies that.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker; this is a timely moment to call me, given what the Minister says about remedies. I put in a freedom of information request about the adult residential weekly rate across every single council in the country. Buckinghamshire gets £615 a week, while Birmingham, including the home where my grandparents both died, gets £436 and has to make an additional charge of £55 per week on the residents who live there, who are no doubt poorer than those who live in Buckinghamshire. Does that sound like a discrepancy that is being solved by the Government’s system? Are nans and granddads in Buckinghamshire worth more than they are in Birmingham, Yardley?

David Mowat: In terms of quality in Buckinghamshire and Birmingham, we look at the CQC reports right across the system, and we are not finding a geographic variation based on those sorts of statistics. That is just the fact of the matter.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I have heard nothing from the Minister to demonstrate that he understands the severity of the situation facing social care. Last week, the Local Government Association met a cross-party of group of MPs. It said that local government needs £1.3 billion to stabilise social care, and pointed out that that money cannot be raised by a council tax increase, especially because that raises the least money in the areas with the highest need.

David Mowat: In terms of council tax increases, this is not about the local government settlement that has already been announced. The additional better care fund will start to deliver more money from next April, and will deliver more money after that. During the course of this Parliament, there will be a 5% increase, in real terms, in money spent on adult social care.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I hear what the Minister says about the better care fund, but that obviously applies from next April. How is it fair that this year the area I represent—the 19th most disadvantaged constituency in the country—will be able to raise only half of what an area like Kingston upon Thames can raise? We can raise about £5; it can raise about £10. How can that be fair for social care?

David Mowat: This year, 42% of councils are increasing their adult social care funding in real terms. The discrepancy caused by the precept is addressed by the way in which we allocate the additional better care fund component and the formula that is used for that.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I think the Minister recognises that there is a crisis and that the precept alone will not address it, so does he agree with the former Health Secretary, Stephen Dorrell, who said this morning that it was a missed opportunity in the autumn statement not to invest in social care?
David Mowat: I am not giving the autumn statement, but I will say again that there is a 5% increase in real terms in adult social care funding during this Parliament, and that 42% of councils are increasing the budget in real terms this year.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister needs to recognise that not only can it be more difficult for cities to raise money—we have already heard from colleagues comparing the amount that would be raised by increasing council tax in cities as opposed to more affluent rural areas—but demographic concerns make delivering health services more challenging in cities such as Bristol. We are already looking at £92 million of cuts or savings that we have got to find over the next five years. Will the Minister come to Bristol to talk to the Mayor and see what challenges we are facing?

David Mowat: Cities do have issues with delivering social care, but so do rural areas, which quite often have a very high proportion of older people. That, in itself, can absorb a great deal of cost. The truth is that, as I have acknowledged, the whole system is under pressure, including in Bristol. We acknowledge that, and we are increasing the total spend by 5% during this Parliament.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): We have heard from my hon. Friends about the failings of the social care precept model to address this issue, but what of councils such as Cambridgeshire, which chose not even to take the meagre resources available? Offered 4%, the council took just 2% this year, leaving the local hospital with 100 over-85-year-olds with nowhere to go. When are the Government going to stand up for older people in Cambridgeshire?

David Mowat: That was a decision made by Cambridgeshire County Council, and a number of other councils, such as Hammersmith and Fulham, made the same choice not to increase the precept. Presumably, they did not feel as though they needed to use that money for adult social care. That is a choice that those councils have, and it is a choice that they must take to their voters.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Sheffield is about to lose its last emergency respite care centre for patients with complex dementia needs. Those patients cannot be cared for in the community, and people desperately do not want to see that centre go. Sheffield already has the second-largest better care fund in the country. If today is not the day for the Minister to issue a royal commission, when will he act?

David Mowat: I am not aware of the specific issue that the hon. Lady raised about the respite care centre in Sheffield that is on the point of closure, and I would be happy to discuss that with her so that I understand it better. I can only repeat that today is not the day that we are going to announce a royal commission into funding.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Care providers in my constituency tell me that they are losing staff to Asda because they cannot compete on pay and conditions, because the council cannot commission care at a price that enables them to do so. What is the Minister going to do to stem the haemorrhaging of careworkers from the profession and, therefore, the haemorrhaging of the provision of care?

David Mowat: There is an issue with that, and that issue exists in various parts of the country. We acknowledge it and we need to manage it. We also need to manage the total number of beds in the system and the total number of domiciliary providers in the system. The total number of beds, as I said earlier, is the same now as it was six years ago. The total number of domiciliary providers is around 40% higher.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Minister, in a debate on 16 November, congratulated “both Halton and Warrington Councils on being two of the best performing councils in the country on delayed transfers of care and on increasing their budget.”—[Official Report, 16 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 350.] Halton still has a massive shortfall, because the precept goes nowhere near meeting the demand on the services in the area. The simple fact is this: there is no coherent national strategy or funding package in place to solve this crisis we now face. The Government are abrogating their responsibility, and the system will tip over.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The chief executive of Care England has said that under the current regime, “about 40% of care services will no longer be viable,” meaning that a number of services will be lost. When does the Minister intend to do something about this crisis?

David Mowat: The number of beds available in the system right now is about the same as it was six years ago. There is an issue with managing the financial performance of significant care providers. One thing we brought in two years ago was a robust process, led by the CQC, to look at the financial performance of the biggest providers and to warn us of any issues that may arise. We are very keen on pursuing that and making sure that it happens.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): This is a national crisis that this Government have wilfully ignored for years. The Minister said in his opening statement that there is no issue that cannot be solved by throwing money at it. Is it not about time that he put his money where his mouth is?

David Mowat: The hon. Lady paraphrases what I said rather inaccurately. I said that money would help with any system, but the issues are about quality, leadership and best practice as well. All those things are within the ambit of my job, and that is what I am pursuing.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Everything we have heard today from the Minister seems fundamentally to deny that the council tax precept is no solution to the
problem and in fact exacerbates it. Is he aware that Ray
James of the Association of Directors of Social Services
has said:
“The Council Tax precept will raise least money in areas of
greatest need which risks heightening inequality”?
If that is what experts in the field are saying, why does
the Minister think he knows better?

**David Mowat:** I often discuss this and other issues
with Ray James. It is true that the precept on its own
would result in an uneven distribution of revenue, which
is why the additional moneys coming from the better
care fund will be allocated using a formula that corrects
that.

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**Social Care Funding**

**Sky: 21st Century Fox Takeover Bid**

4.11 pm

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and
Sport if she will make a statement on 21st Century
Fox’s bid to take over the remaining 61% of Sky.

**The Minister for Digital and Culture** (Matt Hancock):
As the House will know, Sky announced on Friday that
it had received an approach from 21st Century Fox to
acquire the 61% share of Sky that it does not yet already
own. The announcement made it clear that the independent
directors of Sky and 21st Century Fox have reached an
agreement on price. However, the offer is subject to
further discussion, and Sky has advised that there is no
certainty at this stage that an offer will be made. The
terms of any deal will obviously need to be agreed by
the non-21st Century Fox shareholders of Sky. The
announcement also said that under the takeover code,
21st Century Fox is required to set out its intentions by

The Secretary of State has powers to intervene in
certain media mergers on public interest grounds, as set
on the operation of the public interest merger provisions
under the Act indicates how the intervention regime
will operate in practice and the approach that the Secretary
of State is likely to adopt in considering cases. Any
transaction will be looked at on its merits, on a case-by-case
basis. The guidance makes it clear that the Secretary of
State will aim to take an initial decision on whether to
intervene within 10 working days of formal notification
of the merger to the competition authorities, or of the
transaction being brought to her attention. No such
formal notification has yet been received.

The role of the Secretary of State is a quasi-judicial
one, and it is important that she acts independently and
is not subject to improper influence. It would be
inappropriate for me or the Secretary of State to comment
further on the proposed bid under the Act. In the light
of Friday’s statement and given the role of the Secretary
of State, the Department is putting in place procedures
to ensure that her decision-making process is scrupulously
fair and impartial should a decision be necessary. This
will include guidance for other Ministers and officials
on dealing with the parties to the bid or any other
interested parties. We are of course aware of the wider
interest of Parliament in these matters, and we will keep
the House updated as appropriate within the legal
framework.

**Kevin Brennan:** I thank the Minister for his response.
Late on Friday, a new bid for Sky was revealed. Five
years ago, an equivalent bid was abandoned, after Rupert
Murdoch and News Corporation were engulfed in the
phone hacking storm. At that time the House was
united behind a substantive motion calling on Rupert
Murdoch to withdraw his bid. The concerns back in
2011 were not only about the serious wrongdoing being
uncovered in the phone hacking scandal but about the
concentration of media power and ownership in fewer
and fewer hands. I have re-read the motion—which we
all supported, on both sides of the House—and nowhere
does it say that we should sit quietly for five years and
come back when we have forgotten all about it. We have
not forgotten about it, and we also have not forgotten
that when the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street this summer she said to the people of this country:

“When we take the big calls we will think not of the powerful, but you.”

This is a big call, so we need to know whose side the Government are on.

Ofcom’s original assessment was that the deal may “operate against the public interest”.

Will the Minister commit the Government, here and now, to issuing a public interest intervention notice and referring the bid to Ofcom? Remember that, back in 2012, Ofcom’s assessment was that the chief executive officer of Fox, James Murdoch, “repeatedly fell short of the exercise of responsibility to be expected of him as CEO and chairman.”

The Prime Minister met Rupert Murdoch in New York in September. Was the bid discussed then? Did she give him any assurances about the bid, or discuss his future support for her and/or for her Government?

I understand that, as the Minister said, this is a quasi-judicial decision, and that the words he says today will be scrutinised by some of the highest-paid lawyers on at least two continents. Nevertheless, will he assure us that the Secretary of State is prepared to stand up to powerful interests and ensure that this deal is properly and independently scrutinised?

Matt Hancock: I am grateful for the acknowledgment by the Opposition Front-Bench team that, owing to the quasi-judicial nature of the decision, procedures have to be followed properly. That is what we fully intend to do. Formal notification of this proposal has not been received, and the Secretary of State cannot make a decision prior to that. As I said, the rules are that she should aim to take such a decision within 10 days of formal notification.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I thank the Minister for his answer. I also recognise the quasi-judicial nature of the decision the Secretary of State has to make. I have two technical questions. Since the bid in 2010, which was withdrawn, the Murdoch empire has been divided, with the newspaper operations separated from the broadcast and film operations. How much weight will the Secretary of State give to that separation from the broadcast and film operations? How much weight will he give to the restructuring of the Murdoch companies?

Matt Hancock: The plurality rules are clearly set out, as the hon. Gentleman knows, and the Secretary of State will follow them very carefully in this determination.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that in the event of a bid there is a strong case for asking the regulators to provide advice about any concerns on competition or plurality grounds? Does he agree that this bid would essentially be an investment decision rather than an acquisition, as 21st Century Fox already has effective control of Sky? Does he also agree that since the last bid, which was approved by Ofcom subject to certain remedies, there has been a considerable increase in competition in the pay TV market?

Matt Hancock: The decision has to be taken in the context of the world as we find it. The situation, as we find it, in terms of ownership is that 21st Century Fox owns 39% of Sky, and the notification to the stock exchange on Friday was about the proposal to buy the other 61%. Those issues will be taken into account when the decision is made.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I understand the Minister’s complex position on these matters, but will he take into account the fact that when we compare the situation now with five years ago, when the House passed unanimously the motion saying that the bid should not go ahead, we see that we still have unresolved phone hacking issues in the courts and a system of self-regulation that has not satisfied the victims of phone hacking? Will he bear in mind this question—what has really changed since the House passed the motion five years ago? In my view, very little, which is why I believe the bid should be rejected.

Matt Hancock: It is enjoyable to be at the rerun of one of the right hon. Gentleman’s greatest hits. He says that my position today is complex, but actually it is very simple: we have not yet received a formal notification, and when we do, the Secretary of State will have 10 days to consider, under the Enterprise Act and other legislation, whether it is necessary to take action.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): At this early stage, is the Department considering whether some of the conditions that Ofcom attached to the deal last time, such as the guarantee of editorial independence for Sky News, would be required this time around, given the restructuring of the Murdoch companies?

Matt Hancock: The notification was given to the stock market on Friday morning, but no formal notification to the competition authorities has been received, so it is fair to say that we are quite early on in the process, but all things that it is appropriate to consider will be considered.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What differences can the Minister see between this bid and the one referred to the competition authorities by Vince Cable in 2010?

Matt Hancock: It will be quite hard, until formal notification, to know the shape of the proposals. When we do, we will have a look at them.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the shadow Minister on tabling the urgent question, and I completely understand the Minister’s problem of not wanting to judge an application of which notification has not actually been given, but will he take it from today that there is a concern across the House about this issue and will he undertake to keep the House fully informed? That is the message coming across.

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. I would be delighted to keep the House as informed as is appropriate under the legislation the House has passed. I apologise to the House if some of my remarks sound a little reticent, but it will understand that this is a quasi-judicial decision.
The Secretary of State does not want her position prejudiced—I do not want to do that—but all these considerations will be taken into account.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): From whom will the Secretary of State take advice about the competition implications of the bid?

Matt Hancock: Of course, advice will be taken from officials in the Department, and procedures are being put in place to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest and that the decision is taken appropriately.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I would like to give the Minister a second chance to answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). Did the Prime Minister discuss this deal with Murdoch back in September in New York?

Matt Hancock: No.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Surely the only thing that really matters is the public interest. When one man controlled 40% of the newspapers in this country, including the largest daily newspaper and Sunday newspaper, and by far the largest broadcaster—by value—in the country, it poisoned the well of British politics. I urge Ministers, as they go through this business, in the quasi-judicial manner the Minister suggests, that they keep that close to the front of their minds.

Matt Hancock: I am grateful for the wisdom of the hon. Gentleman, who I know has taken a great interest in these affairs for a long time.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): More than 8,000 people work at Sky's headquarters in my constituency, and many will be concerned about this news, particularly those in journalism. Is the Minister at all concerned that through this deal one man would take 100% ownership of one of the UK's biggest media outlets?

Matt Hancock: I want to make it clear that the Secretary of State's decision relates to media plurality. Of course, there are competition and labour market issues, but the Enterprise Act rules are clear about the breadth of the decision she will take, and she will follow those procedures very carefully.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said about the public interest in and concern about this issue. Phone hacking has not died in people's memories, and anyone who watched the American elections would have had real concerns about the way in which Fox News operates. I urge the Minister to realise that in the public's mind, this man is not a fit and proper person to have control of our media.

Matt Hancock: I can assure the hon. Lady that the Secretary of State is a fit and proper person to take this decision. Members of all parties have made their views clear, and we will operate carefully, with appropriate guidance in place for both Ministers and officials, to make sure that this decision is taken in the proper way.

Yemen

4.25 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): Will the Minister provide an answer to the urgent question of which I have given him notice?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): As the Foreign Secretary made clear during his trip to the region this weekend, Britain supports the Saudi-led campaign to restore the legitimate Government in Yemen. Ultimately, a political solution is the best way to bring long-term stability to Yemen and end the conflict.

We continue to have deep concern for the suffering of the people of Yemen, which is why making progress on peace talks is the top priority. As with all negotiations of this kind, they will not be quick or indeed easy, and a lot of tough discussions will need to be had. The United Nations has drawn up a road map for ending the conflict, which outlines the security and political steps the parties must take. The UK is playing a central role in this process.

The Foreign Secretary hosted the last meeting of the Quad, comprising Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, the United States and the United Kingdom, which UN Special Envoy Ismail Ahmed attended, in London on 20 November to discuss peace talks. The UK, the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary raised the issue of Yemen during their visits to the region, and I met Vice-President General Ali Mohsen on Saturday during the Manama dialogue.

As the House will be aware, Yemen is one of the most serious humanitarian crises in the world. So, in addition to our considerable diplomatic efforts to try and bring an end to the conflict, the UK is the fourth-largest donor to Yemen, committing £100 million to Yemen for 2016-17. UK aid is already making a difference there; last year we helped more than 1.3 million Yemenis with food, medical supplies, water and emergency shelter.

The situation in Yemen is indeed grave, which is why we are debating this matter today. There are now plans for the Quad to meet in the near future, so that we can move this very important process forward.

Mr Speaker: I appreciate the great pithiness of the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) in referring to the urgent question of which he had given me notice, but in the name of transparency and for the benefit of those attending to our proceedings from outside the Chamber, I should advise that the question is “To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement to clarify the United Kingdom's policy on the conflict in Yemen.”

Keith Vaz: I am grateful to you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and to the Minister for his answer.

Until now, our foreign policy objectives in Yemen have been crystal clear: pursuing a cessation of hostilities and backing a UN mandated intervention. Last week, the Foreign Secretary was absolutely right to speak of
his profound concern for the Yemeni people and correct to say that this conflict could not be solved by force alone. However, his words also revealed an inconsistency in our foreign policy, which if not addressed immediately, threatens to wreck everything that we are trying to accomplish.

Will the Minister please confirm that we would never be involved in any puppeteering or proxy wars anywhere in the world, including in Yemen? Our influence and credibility as an honest broker is now being seriously questioned. We criticised Russia’s bombing of Aleppo; the Russians accuse us of supporting the same thing in Yemen.

Further to the Minister’s reply, can he clarify that our objective is an immediate ceasefire, and can he lay out the detail of how we will get to that position? As the Foreign Secretary has said, we hold the pens on Yemen at the United Nations. There is already a draft Security Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire, resumption of peace talks and humanitarian access. Where is that resolution now? Will it be tabled before the Security Council before the end of the year? We must not fiddle as Yemen burns. On Saturday, Islamic State bombed a military camp in Aden, killing 35 soldiers. The UN humanitarian co-ordinator, Stephen O’Brien, calls Yemen a “man-made brutal humanitarian disaster”, with four fifths of the population in desperate need of emergency aid.

On Wednesday, the House, including the Minister, will show its support for the incredible work of the humanitarian agencies at “Yemen Day”. Today, the Disasters Emergency Committee announced a long overdue emergency appeal, but if the fighting does not stop that will not be enough. The Government must speak with one voice and with one aim for Yemen, and that should be an immediate ceasefire. Anything else only plays into the hands of terrorist organisations, damages our diplomacy and increases the suffering of the Yemeni people.

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his continuing work and interest in Yemen and for bringing it to the attention of the House. I can confirm that we remain resolute in working toward a cessation of hostilities, developing confidence-building measures, working with the United Nations and supporting the UN envoy. I absolutely agree that we will not win by military means alone; we need a long-term political solution for a country that, as he knows, has been fragmented since its beginning.

The right hon. Gentleman is right that as well as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, we are the UN penholder and therefore take a lead on these matters. Humanitarian access is vital. I made it clear that we are investing more funds to support the UN agencies and others. The UN Security Council resolution is being discussed in New York as we speak, and as I mentioned, the Quad meeting that will take these matters further takes place in the very near future.

The right hon. Gentleman touched on a comparison between Yemen and Syria. President Hadi and the coalition that has been created to support him has the backing of the United Nations through resolution 2216, so there is a legitimate call to support President Hadi and the work he has done. Without that, the Houthis advance would have pushed much further, through the capital and down to the port of Aden, and we would have had a full-scale civil war. In contrast, there is no UN resolution to support Russia’s involvement in Syria. The Russians are supporting a brutal regime, which has used chemical weapons and barrel bombs against its own people; they have compounded the situation. The two are not comparable in any way.

Britain remains resolute in its support for President Hadi and for the United Nations and its envoy in bringing the necessary stakeholders back to the table. I hope that we will see some developments in the very near future.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Given that I have only just come down from the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, I thank you for calling me, Mr Speaker.

May I ask my hon. Friend the Minister not only to work hard to get the macro-deal on a ceasefire between the competing parties at the top level, but to make sure that the work of all the international agencies is engaged with all the subsidiary interests in Yemen—a nation of enormous complexity? We must not just get a political track at the top level and ignore all the consequences that may flow regionally and more locally in Yemen.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is right to point to the complexities of Yemen and what is going on there. On the face of it, the Houthis are against President Hadi, but as those who have visited or are familiar with the country will know, there is a complex network of tribal loyalties which are not necessarily supportive of any circumstance at the time, and those loyalties move depending on movements of funds, weapons, interests and so forth. It is a very complicated situation.

The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who raised the urgent question, spoke of the attack at the weekend. Reports suggest Daesh was responsible for it, although we still await confirmation. That shows how al-Qaeda, which is firmly based in the peninsula, and, indeed, Daesh, are taking advantage of the vacuum created by the absence of governance. That is all the more reason why we are encouraging the necessary stakeholders to come to the table.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) is right to say co-ordination of humanitarian aid is needed. The port of Hudaydah is currently under Houthi control, and until we can open it up, ships with humanitarian aid will continue to queue up and be unable to get in to provide that important aid for the rest of the country.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me in the circumstances. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary for securing the urgent question. The authority and passion he brings to the issue of Yemen is without equal in this House. For the last year and a half my right hon. Friend has been consistent and principled in his advice. Let us be clear that the difference between that and what we have heard this week from the Government could not be more stark. On Yemen, there is no consistency and no principle.

Last Thursday, we heard the Foreign Secretary say that Saudi Arabia was fighting proxy wars in countries like Yemen, and we know the consequences all too well:
thousands of civilians killed, the country’s agricultural infrastructure destroyed, millions of Yemeni children facing starvation. Let us be clear: the Foreign Secretary was absolutely right on this, and we say, “Good for you, Boris.” Yet he has still been slapped down by Downing Street and forced to go to Riyadh to “clarify his remarks”—and he has sent his junior Minister here today to support Saudi Arabia’s actions to the hilt. It seems that he will not support our calls for an independent UN investigation into Saudi Arabia’s alleged war crimes, and he will continue selling it arms to prosecute its proxy wars. There is no consistency, there is no principle, there is just more shabby hypocrisy.

There are many questions I would like to ask the Minister today, but let me just ask one. It is the same question asked of him by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East, and he has not had an answer, so I will ask it again. For two months now the UN Security Council has been waiting for the United Kingdom to present its proposed resolution to effect a ceasefire in Yemen to allow access for humanitarian relief. For two months, a draft resolution has been in circulation, so let me ask the Minister again: why has the resolution not been presented and who is holding it up, because the people of Yemen cannot afford any more delay?

**Mr Ellwood:** I am not sure where to start. I will focus on the serious questions the hon. Lady poses—not just one question, but all the questions.

First, the Foreign Secretary made it clear—the hon. Lady should read the full passage of what he was saying—that there are concerns about the leadership needed in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere, and that needs to be pushed forward; we need strong leadership in those places. As I said to the right hon. Member for Leicester East, the UN Security Council resolution is being discussed, but the hon. Lady should be aware of the details of how they are put together: we do not simply do it as a paper exercise; we do it by ensuring that the stakeholders that he is representing to ensure that the country at the moment and we have to work with the stakeholders who can bring them to the table. I take this opportunity to thank the Omanis, who have played such an important role in bringing the Houthis forward so that they can accept a long-term deal to take us a way from military action to a political dialogue.

**Emily Thornberry** Answer the question.

**Mr Ellwood:** If the hon. Lady holds on to her seat, I will answer all the questions—not just one question, but all the questions.

First, the Foreign Secretary made it clear—the hon. Lady should read the full passage of what he was saying—that there are concerns about the leadership needed in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere, and that needs to be pushed forward; we need strong leadership in those places. As I said to the right hon. Member for Leicester East, the UN Security Council resolution is being discussed, but the hon. Lady should be aware of the details of how they are put together: we do not simply do it as a paper exercise; we do it by ensuring that the work has been done to make sure it can stand. If the homework has not been done to make sure that the stakeholders are supportive of the resolution, what is the point of having the resolution anyway, other than to put ourselves on the back and make ourselves look good? That may be good enough for the Labour party but it is certainly not good enough for the Government.

The hon. Lady did not mention the challenges we face with the Houthis themselves. I do not dispute that this has been a difficult campaign for the coalition. It has been new to conducting sustained warfare and has had to learn very difficult lessons in how to do that, governed by 21st-century rules. However, I make it clear that the Houthis are causing huge problems in that country. That needs to be acknowledged by this House as well. They have committed extrajudicial killings, unlawful arrests, detentions, abductions, enforced disappearances and the shelling of civilians in places such as Taiz. Landmines have also been used. Those are all things that have prolonged this conflict; the Houthis have not been brought to the table. What is required now is for all sides to work with the Quad and the UN to ensure that we can get the necessary ceasefire in place, which will lead us to the UN resolution that the hon. Lady is calling for.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): To what extent is intransigence on the part of President Hadi a block to a ceasefire?

**Mr Ellwood:** The President is the legitimate leader of the country at the moment and we have to work with the stakeholders that he is representing to ensure that the road map is compatible with the needs and support of the people he represents. That is why we have had long discussions with him and the vice-president to ensure that we can bring them to the table. I take this opportunity to thank the Omanis, who have played such an important role in bringing the Houthis forward so that they can accept a long-term deal to take us away from military action to a political dialogue.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is regrettable that the humanitarian situation has worsened to such an extent that the Disasters Emergency Committee has had to launch an appeal. We hope that it will be widely supported so that the people of Yemen do not, as has been predicted, literally run out of food in the coming months.

What more will the Government do to co-ordinate with the DEC and responders on the ground on the humanitarian response? What steps are the Government taking to ensure that that humanitarian response is not undermined by their continued laissez-faire attitude to the behaviour of Saudi Arabia? Calls for arms sales are only getting louder. Although we keep hearing that UK military officials are not carrying out strikes and are not directing operations, it begs the question, what are they doing on the ground to ensure that the coalition respects international humanitarian law? We hear so much about the Government’s positive relationship with Saudi Arabia, although it not clear whether that extends to the Foreign Secretary, but what good is that relationship if the Government cannot or will not use their influence to prevent the killing and starvation of innocent civilians?

**Mr Ellwood:** Perhaps I can start with the hon. Gentleman’s last point. I would be happy to present to him the speeches that the Foreign Secretary made during the Manama dialogue, which confirmed not only our important working relationship with our close ally Saudi Arabia, but the frank conversations we have with that country and the work we do in stopping terrorist attacks from taking place. The hon. Gentleman could then become familiar with why that relationship is important. If we broke that relationship, the Gulf and, one could argue, the region and the UK could easily become a more dangerous place. That is not something he would advocate.

The hon. Gentleman speaks about the war itself. He has made the point in the Chamber before—he has been consistent on this—about concerns over the errors
Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is right in implying that, were President Hadi not to receive the legitimate support through UN Security Council resolution 2216, the country would be in full-scale civil war. The complete breakdown in governance would provide incubation for organisations such as Daesh, al-Nusra and al-Qaeda. That would spill out way beyond the peninsula into the region. That is not something that we would want to contest. It is right that the coalition was formed and it is why we support the coalition. However, we absolutely share the concerns that the coalition was formed and that is the way any country conducting sustained warfare operates—are not worthy, we will call for an independent investigation, but that is the process that we follow, that the United States is following right now on incidents that have taken place in Afghanistan, and indeed that Saudi Arabia follows: they conduct their own investigations. If those investigations are found wanting, I will support a UN independent investigation.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I ask my hon. Friend what chance he would give President Hadi if Saudi Arabia were to withdraw from its engagement—a proper engagement under UN resolutions—in Yemen?

Mr Ellwood: On the hon. Gentleman’s last point, we will not support an independent report until we allow the Saudi Arabians to do their reports. That is the process that we face. They have never actually undertaken such publications and reports, so they are having to learn themselves. As we know, it is a conservative country that is unused to the limelight that is now being thrown on it. They must act responsibly, respectfully and transparently, as we would in the same situation.

On humanitarian aid, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This House and this country can be proud of the work that we are doing, not just here but right across the piece. He is right to say that the DFID Minister and, indeed, the Secretary of State for International Development are very much engaged with that. At the UN General Assembly in September, it was us who held a donors conference to encourage other countries to match our funding so that we can provide support to the people of Yemen. However, it is not a lack of funds or equipment that is the problem—

Emily Thornberry: It is a lack of peace.

Mr Ellwood: That is absolutely right: it is a lack of peace and a lack of access, particularly through the central port on the Red sea.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): Charity agencies report that it is very difficult both to get into Yemen and, once there, to get aid out, because of all the bureaucratic challenges, arrests of charity workers, suspensions of programmes and difficulties in obtaining new programmes. Will my hon. Friend bring that up directly with all parties in the conflict, as it is the charity sector that is doing much of the delivery and it should be allowed to have rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access throughout the country?

Mr Ellwood: I think that that is the point that everybody is most concerned about. Although it can take time for both parties to come to the table and work out the details, there is a sense of urgency in making sure that the humanitarian aid can get in as early as possible. That will be the focus of the next Quad meeting. Yes, we want parties to come together, but we immediately need access routes. We need the port to be opened fully so that container ships can go in and equipment can be distributed right across the country, not just through the port of Aden, which is how the material currently goes in.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Now that the Foreign Secretary is encouraging transparency and honesty in foreign affairs policy, does the Minister accept that, by signing up to the convention on cluster munitions, the UK is taking a stance that cluster munitions are always in violation of international humanitarian law owing to their indiscriminate and disproportionate nature? If so, arguing that the Saudi use of them is legitimate, as the Minister does, is completely contradictory and in violation of the convention, which states that the UK should always encourage Saudi Arabia not to use them. Why are the UK Government adopting that position?

Mr Ellwood: To be clear, it is against international law only if the country has signed the convention, and there are countries across the world that have yet to do so. We have signed it and it is our policy to encourage others to do so. I had a meeting last Sunday with all the Foreign Ministers of the Gulf Co-operation Council nations, and I formally invited every single one of the Gulf countries to consider signing the convention. I hope that we will be able to move forward on this.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I welcome the fact that the UK has doubled its humanitarian commitment to Yemen to £85 million. Does my hon. Friend believe that the UN General Assembly can be of more help in actively resolving the situation?
Mr Ellwood: If I understand my hon. Friend’s question correctly, she is asking about the General Assembly, as opposed to the UN Security Council, in which case there is no veto. In this arena, it is not so much about the challenge that we face from other permanent members in getting a UN resolution through. If we are going to draft a UN resolution, the important thing is that it needs to work; otherwise, it is simply a paper exercise. That is the homework that our head of mission is currently undertaking with other nations, to make sure that what we write on paper will lead to the cessation of hostilities, confidence-building measures and access to humanitarian aid, which are important; otherwise, it is not worth writing a UN Security Council resolution.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): What representations have Her Majesty’s Government made to the Iranian Government about stopping the flow of arms to the Houthis? At the same time, what representations have been made to facilitate with the Iranians the opening of the ports so that much-needed aid can get through to the Yemenis who are suffering in this civil war?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point: what is Iran’s involvement in Yemen? Is it helpful or is it hindering events? The Prime Minister made it clear that Iran can play a more constructive role in ensuring that weapons systems are not entering the country, that the Houthis are encouraged to come to the table, that the Red sea remains free of ships that may want to arm the Houthis, and that the port is opened. Those are the messages that we are asking Iran to recognise.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): There is no doubt that the conflict in Yemen is a war of proxies, and the Foreign Secretary was absolutely right to criticise Saudi Arabia in the way that he did. However, there had been no mention of Iran until the previous question. The United Kingdom must take some responsibility for the continuing and escalating violence in Yemen, because if we had not agreed to the nuclear deal, the billions of pounds of resources would not have been able to enter this conflict and others in Syria, Lebanon and other parts of the middle east.

Mr Ellwood: The signing of the joint comprehensive plan of action represents an opportunity for Iran to take a more responsible role on the international stage. We know that it has an influence from Baghdad to Damascus to Beirut and, indeed, to Sana’a. We want Damascus to Beirut and, indeed, to Sana’a. We want Iran to step forward and recognise that it is in the region’s interests for it to be more secure and more prosperous. It should elevate itself and rejoin the international community, not continue to hinder the peace process right across the region.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What is particularly pernicious about the use of cluster munitions is that many of the bomblets lie around for a long time, effectively creating minefields where many thousands of innocent civilians, including children, are killed. I am therefore slightly confused by the Government’s position. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), who is fortunately still here, said in Defence questions earlier that the matter had been raised with the Saudis, but this Minister seemed to indicate just now that he does not oppose the Saudis’ use of cluster munitions. Surely we are opposed to their using such munitions and surely the Minister will be happy to condemn it from the Dispatch Box.

Mr Ellwood: I think the hon. Gentleman is trying to put words in my mouth. I made it very clear that our policy is to discourage the use of cluster munitions across the world and to encourage people to sign up to and support the convention. In fact, I think I said in my answer that I absolutely condemn the use of cluster munitions. As he said, they are a legacy that lie around on the battlefield long after it has turned back into a civilian arena, and that is why they cause damage. That is why we signed this important convention and why I have invited all Gulf Co-operation Council nations to support its signing.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): My hon. Friend has already said that there are issues around tribal agreement with the framework, but what measures has he taken to engage all relevant parties in the region to test the framework’s robustness?

Mr Ellwood: We need a collective approach to ensure that stakeholders are supported in coming to the table to discuss not only Yemen but stabilisation, which applies to Iraq, Yemen and Syria. That is where the Gulf nations have a responsibility not only to support legitimate governance, but to take an interest in and commit to stabilisation, post-conflict planning and peacekeeping resolutions after the guns fall silent.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): The first 1,000 days of a child’s life are vital in their lifelong development. Not only are Yemeni children’s basic human rights not being met now in this awful conflict, but they will not have a chance even when the conflict ends. What are the Government doing to ensure that Yemeni children have access to vital nutritious food for the duration of the conflict?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady is right; the travesty is that the length of this conflict is denying a generation, in terms not only of health but education. This is the generation that needs to rebuild the country in the longer term, which is why, as the Minister of State, Department for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), has confirmed, we are working with UNICEF specifically to make sure that we can provide the necessary nutritional meals to support those infants in the important years in the first 1,000 days of their lives.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Let me congratulate the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who asked the urgent question, as I believe the whole House would recognise that he has almost single-handedly kept the issue of Yemen before this House. May I say to the shadow Minister that it was not right to make party political points on Yemen? May I ask our excellent Minister, who has a lot of knowledge of this issue, whether I am right in thinking that the humanitarian aid problem is not the amount—the money for it—but the fact that we cannot get it through? If that is the case, how can we try to open up the blockage?
Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s comments. He is right to point out the difficulties in getting access to these areas. There are a series of checkpoints on roads which mean that humanitarian aid is denied. There are non-governmental organisations and commercial organisations—we are not forgetting those—that do have access in some cases, but some of the aid is taken away as a punishment or penalty, or as the cost of getting into the country. The port is not running properly; the cranes are not working—not one of the old cranes is working there. If we get them working, we will be able suddenly to increase tenfold the aid that can get into the country.

Tom Brake: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: A point of order on cluster musicians? Very well, I will take it now. [Interruption.] Not on musicians, no—I am sorry if I misspoke. It is on cluster munitions, which was what Jack Straw would have called the gravamen of the right hon. Gentleman’s concern. Let us hear it.

Tom Brake: Thank you, Mr Speaker. You will have heard, just a couple of minutes ago, the Minister say that the Government are against cluster munitions, but I have before me a letter from the Minister dated 3 November 2016, in which he states:

“The UK maintains the view that cluster munitions are not prima facie illegal, and can be used in compliance with international law by States that are not party to the Convention...provided that they are used in a manner that is compatible with international humanitarian law, including distinction, proportionality and the obligation to take all feasible precautions.”

I am confused, because the Minister says that the Government are completely opposed to cluster munitions and yet in this letter he sets out a view that in some circumstances they are perfectly legitimate and acceptable to use.

Mr Speaker: The answer to the right hon. Gentleman is twofold. If what he wants is personal reassurance, I suggest that his appropriate recourse is to sidle up to the junior Minister and ask to have a cup of tea with him. Secondly, if he is concerned for the benefit of the House as a whole and he wants something formally on the record—as a former Deputy Leader of the House, I doubt he particularly needs my advice, but I will proffer it—he should table a written question on this substantive point upon which he requires clarification, and I think he will probably find his salvation coming pretty soon.

Mr Ellwood indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: A helpful nod from a sedentary position from the Minister confirms that my expectation is correct. If there are no further points of order, I shall in a moment call—

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op)

rose—

Mr Speaker: I do beg the hon. Lady’s pardon. Lady’s pardon. Patience is a virtue, and I thank her for waiting.
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I rise to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the need for immediate and concerted international action to evacuate from east Aleppo approximately 40 doctors and 70 nursing staff, up to 500 children, at least 100 of whom have been wounded and are receiving rudimentary care, and thousands of terrified civilians caught between the different fighting groups in a 10 km by 10 km enclave where most of those who are trapped now are.

Mr Speaker, I make no apology to the House for raising this vital issue again. You granted a debate on these matters two months ago. On that occasion, the Foreign Secretary made his first major speech from the Dispatch Box and expressed the horror so many feel at what is happening in Syria and Aleppo.

I am sure, Mr Speaker, that if you grant this emergency debate the whole House will hope to hear an update from the Foreign Secretary who has already shown his deep and principled concern about what is taking place. The debate will enable us to explore, with the Government, how Britain’s immense diplomatic muscle—the finest foreign service in the world—can do more to secure a deal that will ensure a ceasefire for at least 24 hours to enable innocent civilians to be rescued from the hideous circumstances that now prevail in east Aleppo.

Britain took a lead some years ago at the United Nations in developing the international community’s responsibility to protect. We said after Srebrenica, Darfur and Rwanda, “Never again.” It is happening today as we meet. There are reports this afternoon, accompanied by the most hideous photographs, of the use of sarin—a nerve gas—by the regime in Hama. At dawn today, a chlorine bomb, the second in three days, hit a medical point at Kallaseh. There is no escape from chlorine bombs—civilians are forced to come out from the rubble and cellars where they are hiding. The use of chlorine munitions is a war crime. Their use defies every facet of international humanitarian law.

Many of these terrified civilians trapped in this hellhole, which now resembles Stalingrad at the end of its destruction, are children. They have few places to hide. Tomorrow night in Aleppo, the temperature is expected to reach minus 4°C.

Mr Speaker, as we contemplate a warm and secure Christmas here in Britain, I hope you will agree that the House should urgently discuss not “Something must be done,” but “What in the name of humanity we, the international community, will do to save those who today are in such dreadful jeopardy.”

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely international action to protect civilians in Aleppo and more widely across Syria. I have listened carefully to the application and I am satisfied that the matter raised by him is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. I now put it to the House.

Application agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has obtained the leave of the House. The debate will be held tomorrow, on Tuesday 13 December, as the first item of public business. I must simply remind the House, as the prelude to what I am about to say, that there is other important scheduled business to follow and there is flexibility and discretion with the Chair in terms of the timing of such debates. I have decided that the debate will last for two hours, and will arise on a motion, “That the House has considered the specified matter,” as set out in the right hon. Gentleman’s application. I hope that that is helpful to the House.

I am hinting to the House, by the way, that if lots of Members who are showing up today also show up tomorrow, there is no reason why they should not be cued to speak. If it is helpful to the House, the emphasis will perhaps be on hearing pithy speeches from several people.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On a different matter, today marks precisely 150 years since an explosion at the Oaks colliery killed 383 Barnsley miners. A number of the victims were under 14 and the youngest were just 10 years old. I seek your guidance on how best to ensure that this House commemorates the service and sacrifice of all those who lost their lives at the Oaks colliery disaster 150 years ago today.

Mr Speaker: First, I think the hon. Gentleman has gone some distance towards achieving that recognition and commemoration by virtue of his ingenious use of the device of the point of order. Secondly, it is open to the hon. Gentleman, with colleagues, to table an early-day motion on the matter. My hunch is that he will not find it difficult to identify colleagues who are willing to assist him. Thirdly, if the hon. Gentleman is still not satisfied with what will by then be his prodigious efforts, it is always open to him to seek an Adjournment debate in which the matter can be more fully marked. I hope that is helpful to him.
**New Clause 1**

(1) The Secretary of State may, by regulations, make provision for a Save as You Earn scheme.

(2) The scheme shall require employers to make deductions from wages if—

(a) the employee has requested to enrol on the Save as You Earn scheme;

(b) the deducted wages are paid into a Help-to-Save account; and

(c) the amount deducted does not exceed the maximum monthly amount as defined in paragraph 10(2) of Schedule 2 to this Act. 

(3) Any provider of a Lifetime ISA must confirm whether an applicant—

(a) intends to use the Lifetime ISA for the purposes of paragraph 7(1)(b) of Schedule 1 on—

(b) the number of individuals who have benefited from the measures, and

(c) the average tax deduction received by an individual as a result of the measures.

(4) The findings of the assessment must be made publicly available.

This new clause would place a duty on HMRC to review annually the impact of Lifetime ISAs on automatic enrolment and laid before Parliament.

**New clause 2—Impact review: automatic enrolment and pensions savings—**

(1) Within six months of this Act coming into force the Treasury must conduct an analysis of the distribution of benefits of Lifetime ISAs and Help-to-Save accounts including between—

(a) households at different levels of income,

(b) people of different genders,

(c) people with disabilities, and

(d) black and minority ethnic groups.

(2) The findings of the analysis conducted under subsection (1) must be laid before Parliament.

This new clause would require a review of the Bill’s effect on the UK housing market.

**New clause 3—Provision for automatic enrolment and workplace saving schemes—**

(1) The Treasury must make provision by regulations to ensure—

(a) house prices in the UK, and

(b) the operation of the housing market.

(2) The findings of the review must be made publicly available and laid before Parliament.

This new clause would require a review of the Bill’s effect on workplace pensions automatic enrolment and pensions savings.

**New clause 4—First-time residential purchase: research and impact assessment—**

(1) Within one year of this Act coming into force the Treasury must conduct a review into the potential impact of provisions within paragraph 7(1)(b) of Schedule 1 on—

(a) house prices in the UK, and

(b) the operation of the housing market.

(2) The conclusions of the review must be made publicly available and laid before Parliament.

This new clause would require a review of the Bill’s effect on the operation of the housing market.

**New clause 5—Distributional analysis of the impact of the Lifetime ISA and Help to Save—**

(1) Within six months of this Act coming into force the Treasury must conduct an analysis of the distribution of benefits of Lifetime ISAs and Help-to-Save accounts including between—

(a) households at different levels of income,

(b) people of different genders,

(c) people with disabilities, and

(d) black and minority ethnic groups.

(2) The conclusions of the analysis conducted under subsection (1) must be laid before Parliament.

This new clause would require a review of the Bill’s effect on workplace pensions automatic enrolment and Help-to-Save scheme.

**New clause 6—Lifetime ISA and Help-to-Save: value for money—**

(1) Within six months of this Act coming into force the Treasury must assess the value for money provided by the Lifetime ISA and Help-to-Save scheme.

(2) The assessment must in particular include—

(a) the cost to the Exchequer of the measures,

(b) the number of individuals who have benefited from the measures, and

(c) the average tax deduction received by an individual as a result of the measures.

(3) The findings of the assessment must be made publicly available.

This new clause would require a review of the Bill’s impact on the financial advice available to applicants for a Lifetime ISA.

**New clause 7—Advice for applicants—**

(1) The Treasury must make provision by regulations to ensure all providers of Lifetime ISAs or Help-to-Save accounts provide applicants, at the point of application, with advice about the suitability of the product in question for each individual applicant.

This new clause would require a review of the Bill’s effect on financial advice available to applicants for a Lifetime ISA or Help-to-Save scheme.

**Amendment 15, in clause 1, page 1, line 1, leave out clause 1.**

**Amendment 17, in clause 3, page 2, line 17, leave out “1 or”.**

**Amendment 18, page 2, line 19, leave out “Lifetime ISA or”.**

**Amendment 19, page 2, line 23, leave out “Lifetime ISA or”.**

**Amendment 20, in clause 4, page 2, leave out lines 32 to 36.**

**Amendment 21, page 3, leave out lines 9 to 11.**

**Amendment 22, in clause 5, page 3, leave out line 23.**

**Amendment 6, in clause 6, page 3, line 36, leave out from “on” to end of line 37 and insert “30 April 2019”.**

This amendment would delay the commencement of the Bill until the end of April 2019, when all firms will be auto-enrolled and the increase in minimum contributions to eight per cent. will be completed.
Amendment 16, page 5, line 1, leave out schedule 1.

This amendment, together with amendments 15 and 17 to 22, would remove provisions for the Lifetime ISA from the Bill.

Government amendment 3.

Amendment 1, in schedule 2, page 16, line 3, leave out “48” and insert “24”.

Amendment 12, page 16, line 31, at end insert—

“(1A) The conditions specified under subsection (1) shall not include the condition that the individual be over 25 years old if that individual meets all other specified conditions relating to the working tax credit.”

Currently those aged under 25 only qualify for Working Tax Credits if they work at least 16 hours a week. This amendment would ensure any individual aged under 25 would qualify for a Help-to-Save account if they met other specified criteria.

Amendment 2, page 17, line 36, at end insert—

“(d) a credit union.”

Amendment 8, page 18, line 16, leave out “maximum” and insert “average”.

See explanatory statement for amendment 11.

Amendment 9, page 18, line 19, leave out “maximum” and insert “average”.

See explanatory statement for amendment 11.

Amendment 10, page 18, line 19, after “means”, insert “an average of”.

See explanatory statement for amendment 11.

Amendment 11, page 18, line 19, after “£50”, insert “across every two month period within the maturity period”.

Together with amendments 8, 9 and 10, this amendment would allow HTS to provide for “top-up” monthly payments above £50 so long as the average payment for every two months is £50.

Government amendment 4.

Amendment 14, page 19, line 2, at end insert—

“(c) provision for eligible persons to be auto-enrolled into Help-to-Save accounts through deductions from salaries or benefit entitlements unless the individual chooses to opt-out.”

This amendment would enable an ‘auto-enrolment’ workplace saving scheme which would see an individual automatically signed up to a Help-to-Save account. He or she must opt-out to stop money being deducted from their pay or benefits into a savings account.

Government amendment 5.

Amendment 13, page 19, line 31, at end insert—

“(3A) Where a bankruptcy order is made against a person with a Help-to-Save account any bonus paid into the Help-to-Save account will not form part of a debtor’s estate during insolvency proceedings.

(3B) Any bonus paid into a Help-to-Save account shall not be liable to be taken as repayment via third party debt orders.”

Amendment 7, page 20, line 23, at end insert—

“(ba) for a bonus in respect of a Help-to-Save account to be paid after six calendar months beginning with the calendar month in which the account is opened and at six month intervals thereafter;”.

This amendment would reduce the time before the holder of a Help to Save account would receive a government bonus to six months.

Mr Thomas: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak not only to new clause 1, but to amendments 1 and 2. I should declare an interest as a member of the M4 Money credit union and as chair of the all-party group on mutuals.

New clause 1 seeks to give a statutory right to anyone wanting to save with a credit union via payroll deduction. Amendment 1 would reduce to one year the two years that those who are just about managing will wait before getting the Government top-up under Help to Save, to better incentivise saving under the scheme. Amendment 2, about which I shall speak a little more first, seeks to allow credit unions to offer the Help to Save product.

I took part in the Second Reading debate and raised the concern that credit unions would not be allowed to offer the Help to Save product. I have read through the transcripts of that debate and of the Committee proceedings and I can still see no good reason for the Government’s resistance to allowing credit unions to offer the Help to Save scheme. I recognise that Ministers want to ensure national coverage of Help to Save so that everyone who meets the criteria—the potentially 3.5 million people across the UK who Ministers think might do so—regardless of where they live can access the scheme. That clearly makes sense. I have no objection to the choice of National Savings & Investments as that national provider of choice. What I cannot see is any valid reason why credit unions cannot be allowed to complement the NS&I offer.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I too declare an interest as a member of the Cardiff and Vale credit union and I am also pleased to be, like my hon. Friend, a member of the Co-operative party. Does he agree that the Government need to be far more ambitious as regards credit unions playing a full part in financial services, and that, as I mentioned on Second Reading, we need to be heading in the direction of other countries, such as Canada, that have a much bigger credit union sector?

Mr Thomas: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We need much more ambition for credit unions and for financial mutuals and co-operatives more generally. I am thankful for his intervention.

Ministers claimed in Committee that a multiple provider model for Help to Save would not offer value for money, yet as far as I can see they have produced no costings to justify that claim. It is not as if Ministers are dealing in the case of NS&I with a private company demanding an exclusive arrangement as it feels threatened by the competition that credit unions can offer. NS&I is a state-owned bank, effectively, and is responsible to the Treasury. Indeed, I understand that the Minister responsible is the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who is also responsible for policy on credit unions. NS&I has some 25 million customers and £135 billion in assets. By comparison, credit unions across the UK have £1.37 billion in assets, less than 1% of the value of NS&I’s investments. In short, credit unions are no threat to NS&I.

NS&I is under the control of the Treasury, as I have said, and it is in Ministers’ hands, or it was until the start of the House’s proceedings on this issue. The House now has the opportunity to decide whether credit unions should be allowed to offer the Help to Save scheme.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I am delighted to serve as a Labour and Co-operative MP alongside him. Does he agree that allowing such diversity is important in helping to change behaviour? Many of the issues with savings are about cultural attitudes,
and having ways to reach out to communities that might not have engaged in such behaviour is an important part of changing the savings culture in this country.

Mr Thomas: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I hope to deal with it a little more in due course. She is right that credit unions have scope to reach out to more of the 3.5 million people Ministers want to assist through the Help to Save scheme, whom NS&I might not be best placed to help.

Credit unions are not-for-profit financial co-operatives, owned and controlled by their members. They are, I would argue, more uniquely exposed to low and middle-income financial services markets and are used to offering financial services to those who are often excluded from other better known sources of finance. They provide safe savings and affordable loans, with some credit unions offering other products, such as current accounts, individual savings accounts and mortgages.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Is it not true that what is key is that credit unions can also provide loans? We know that low-income families have more bumps in the road than the majority of people on a higher income, so that provision, combined with the opportunity to keep saving, is an important service that NS&I cannot offer.

Mr Thomas: My hon. Friend has stolen one of my lines from later in my speech. She makes an entirely appropriate point: credit unions can offer access to an affordable loan while encouraging people to save at the same time. When the loan is paid off, the incentive to keep saving is still there.

Credit unions have until now enjoyed the support of Members on both sides of the House. From 2006 to 2007 the growth fund, launched by the Co-op party’s—and now Strictly’s—very own Ed Balls, saw more than 400,000 affordable loans offered and saved recipients between £120 million and £135 million in interest that would otherwise have been paid to high-cost lenders. It is that type of success that, after a long Co-operative party campaign under the last Government, saw Ministers, led by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), agree to allow three credit unions to offer services to our soldiers, sailors and airmen and to their families—in short, to offer an armed forces credit union. Given the funding from the Department for Work and Pensions under the last Government to expand credit unions, it seems odd that Ministers should tonight want to continue to exclude credit unions from offering a product in a market in which they already have significant interest and penetration.

5.15 pm

Credit unions—I think this is the point my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) was alluding to—routinely require those borrowing money from them to save as they repay their loan. On completely paying off their loan, those who have borrowed from a credit union have their own pot of savings, which some have never had before. That approach sees many members continue to save over a far longer period after they have overcome the inertia or budgeting difficulties that perhaps prevented them from getting into saving in the first place.

Credit unions also help people to save towards a particular short-term goal. The idea of a rainy day fund, which a number of hon. Members talked about on Second Reading, is often not tangible enough for people to begin a savings habit, whereas saving for Christmas, to go on holiday, to buy a particular good or to access a particular service is. Indeed, according to the Association of British Credit Unions Ltd—the excellent credit union trade body—the available evidence suggests that people are more likely to begin to save towards a defined goal. In this way, they demonstrate to themselves that they can save, and from there more saving takes place. I am told that this is basic behavioural economics.

Other advantages of allowing credit unions to offer Help to Save include the fact that NS&I is not a particularly familiar organisation for many low and middle-income earners. Its offer is fairly impersonal and remote, with little face-to-face contact or obvious customer support. It is difficult to think that many of the target audience will be particularly inspired by such an offer, whereas a credit union trusted by friends or family and able to provide face-to-face support will, for some, be the difference between signing up and starting saving or not.

If credit unions were supported by this House to offer Help to Save, it would boost their ability to grow. It would further raise public awareness, and potentially introduce credit unions to a new group of savers. Given credit unions’ lack of advertising and branding firepower, compared with the great megaliths of financial services, such as the banks, that can only be helpful to the Government’s claimed aims of increasing support for credit unions and creating a more diverse banking market.

New clause 1 locks into law the right of anyone wanting to join a credit union to request payroll deduction. When saving is in the interests of the individual and the country at large, why should we not expect business and other employers to help a little by making it as easy as possible for people who want to save? One way some choose to save is by having an amount, which they decide, deducted automatically from their pay packet by their employer. That is a process they can stop immediately, and it is known as payroll deduction.

Yet, at the moment, whether or not payroll deduction is allowed is entirely in the gift of the employer. The best employers have no problem with it. Often, they will reach agreement with local credit unions or credit unions that operate in their industry. Once they have done so, payroll deduction will be offered by their back office. Indeed, the Ministry of Defence granted the facility of payroll deduction to three credit unions, which now offer services to our soldiers, sailors and airmen and to their families. In so doing, they help to save them, as I alluded to, huge amounts of interest. Some £1 million of affordable credit is already being offered to military personnel.

ABCUL has pointed out to me that the Department for Work and Pensions is the latest Whitehall Department to offer payroll deduction for credit union services to their staff. Again, it has chosen three particular credit unions to work with: Commsave, Hull & East Yorkshire, and Voyager Alliance. A number of staff who work for the DWP have already benefited to the tune of several hundred thousand pounds-worth of affordable loans. Many other Departments in Whitehall also offer this facility. Most police forces offer payroll deduction for credit
union members, as does much of the NHS. Hospitals, NHS trusts and other parts of government are quite right to do so. Unfortunately, however, some outsourced payroll companies try to exploit the terms of their contract and demand a fee for agreeing to offer such a service to an employee.

Payroll deduction takes a tiny amount of time to sort out, yet some employers will not do the right thing to help their employees to save in the way that best suits them. The worst offender that I know of currently is Transport for London, which employs almost 28,000 staff. It claims that there is no demand for credit union access. It says that it offers generous emergency assistance if staff get into problems, that it would be costly to offer payroll deduction, and that it certainly would not want to get into the picking of which credit unions to work with. I struggle to see why, in this regard, TfL is any different from the Ministry of Defence. There were not thousands of soldiers queuing outside the MOD to join a credit union either, and it cost the MOD, whose payroll is outsourced, a fee. Ironically, the payroll company concerned offers payroll deduction to its own staff. TfL’s offer, important as it is, of emergency loans if staff get into trouble is a bit of a red herring. This is absurdly easy for an employee to save on an ongoing basis with a reputable and regulated credit union. If the MOD can work out which credit unions to work with, it should not be beyond the wit of Transport for London to do so as well. I hope that TfL will change its mind. We are having discussions with it, and I hope it will come to see sense in the end; it has a responsibility to do so. Nevertheless, Government should cut through this sort of nonsense and legislate to allow employees the right to request payroll deduction up front through joining a credit union. If saving is both in the individual interest and in the national interest, we should seek to make it as easy as possible for this to be offered.

The last amendment in my name in this group is amendment 1, which would lower the qualifying period of the Help to Save product before the Government top-up begins from 24 months to 12 months. There was some debate in Committee about reducing the time that people have to wait before the top-up is granted. I simply draw the House’s attention to the evidence put in by StepChange, the debt advice charity, suggesting that 24 months was too long to ensure that the Government’s objective of incentivising more savings was met.

I look forward to hearing the views of other Members. I hope that Ministers will, in particular, reflect on the case that I have made for amendment 2. If they are not willing to shift on this issue, I will seek your leave, Mr Speaker, to divide the House on it.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It will come as no surprise to many people in this House that I am here in full support of my Co-op party colleagues on this matter, and in full support of the vital importance of supporting our credit unions because of the debt tsunami that is coming our way as a nation. Some people may think that it is one of my greatest hits to say that 54% of people who are struggling, the cost of food is the problem—literally, the cost of putting food on the table as well as keeping a roof over their heads and those of their families. For 30% of people, the problem is the cost of energy. Those people will look at the weather forecast fearfully as the temperature drops, knowing that they simply cannot afford to put money in the meter to keep their families warm. Increasingly, people are in debt because of their debt: 22% of people are struggling because of credit card repayment debt.

That is everyday Britain. That is the kind of country we have become—a country where debt is so commonplace that people are not just waving but drowning in it. It is the responsibility of all of us to act. We must not simply give people debt advice, or shrug our shoulders and see this as part of how our economy works. We must ask whether there are things we can do to help people to manage their debts.

The debt tsunami will only become worse as we head into 2017. We all recognise that inflation is likely to rise from 1% to possibly 4%, some experts suggest. The cost of food and basic goods such as energy is going to get higher, not lower. So many people’s wages have been frozen for so many years that in 2017 the gap between the start of the month and the end of the month will feel very large. That is why we have to be pragmatic. Pragmatism is about offering people good options for managing what little money they have, and that is where the credit union movement comes into its own. When the Government want to encourage saving, it is absolutely vital that instead of excluding the credit union movement, they embrace it and the benefits that it can offer. A quarter of people in this country have no savings at all, so we need to ask ourselves which movement always has its doors open to every citizen, and how we can help it to bridge that gap. That means looking to the credit union movement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) has made an admirable case for helping our credit union movement and its work. At the risk of repeating what has been said, I want to echo his words and say that we can do so much more. This scheme and the involvement of credit unions are the start, not the end, of that conversation. My own credit union struggled for many years to get on to the high street in Walthamstow, but what a difference that has made. My credit union struggled for many years to get into workplaces and to work with people, but what a difference doing so can make.

Councils around the country, such as Southampton, are working to give people access to a credit union as savers. It is crucial that we see that sort of work enables us to link communities together. It is crucial that we see
credit unions as being not just about borrowing, but about saving. We must recognise that saving enables us to support wider social objectives in a local community.

That is why this omission must be corrected and why Co-operative MPs are standing here tonight to try to get the Government to think again about excluding credit unions from the Help to Save scheme. Instead, we ask the Government to embrace credit unions by accepting the amendment. I join my hon. Friend in saying that if we do not get support from the Government for this change, we will seek to divide the House.

We want to send a message. We know that people will have to borrow. When 2017 looks as dire as it does, with inflation rising, people’s wages still stalling and the cost of living continuing to rise, we have to make sure that people have sensible borrowing options. They also need to have sensible saving options, and the credit union movement is the answer. It is the solution for people who might not have gone anywhere else. If we can get them into a credit union, we can start dealing with their debts and getting them to save.

This is a critical time for our country’s debt portfolio. As I said at the beginning of my remarks, a debt tsunami is heading our way. Let us not turn our backs on it. Let us be sensible about what we can do to help, and let us make credit unions part of the solution.

5.30 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) for his indefatigable pursuit of the issues he has raised today, particularly on the role of credit unions. He is supported by other Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). No reasonable person could disagree with anything articulated by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West in his usual coherent, cogent and reasonable way. He has the support of Labour Front Benchers and of many other hon. Members in the Chamber.

My hon. Friend is in line with organisations such as StepChange Debt Charity, which welcomes the concept of Help to Save, but feels that the Government have not gone far enough in their commitment to facilitating saving. It says that only one in seven people eligible for a scheme are likely to take it up, and it supports the payroll deduction concept suggested by my hon. Friend. Before I deal with the Opposition’s new clauses and amendments, I will first summarise our overall view. Although we fully support any measure that will encourage people to save, particularly young people and those on lower incomes, we feel that the proposed lifetime individual savings account will do little to help those two groups. In the Public Bill Committee, we heard a raft of expert evidence in support of that view, with many experts citing their concern that this may be simply another product in an overcrowded market. The products are not necessarily complicated per se, but the market is.

The Opposition will not stand in the way of the Bill, but we want to make a number of reasonable changes to ensure that the proposed ISA and right-to-buy scheme proposals do what they say they will do. Those with low incomes are already struggling to make it through the week, and they have seen the Government drastically cut in-work benefits. I do not see how people will meet the minimum threshold, particularly given the reports showing that half of UK adults have set aside less than £500 for emergencies. Some families will simply not be able to save £50 every month, as was raised by Scottish National party Members in Committee.

On the impact review of auto-enrolment, the Opposition’s wider concern is that the new savings scheme will interfere with and perhaps even have a negative impact on the automatic enrolment of people into pensions. Do the Government really want to gamble that, with 6.7 million people already auto-enrolled across 250,000 employers, they will not reach their target of 10 million by 2020? The Opposition new clauses and amendments are designed collectively to address the concern expressed across the board, including by the pensions industry, the trade union movement, Select Committees of this House and the Office for Budget Responsibility, which is that the lifetime individual savings account poses a threat to traditional pension savings and, most significantly, to auto-enrolment.

It is self-evident that automatic enrolment, which was mandated by the previous Labour Government, is an outstanding initiative that, as time passes, is starting to achieve the objective set for it. Hence our new clause 2, which proposes to place a duty on Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to review the impact of lifetime ISAs on automatic enrolment annually. Auto-enrolment is one of the few success stories in the pension landscape, and it is widely acknowledged in all sectors to be right. We fear that, intentionally or not, the Government’s policy may put the wider landscape in jeopardy and be a dangerous path to follow. Pensions history suggests that this will only be recognised in years to come. The simple truth is that many people cannot afford to pay contributions to 8% will have been completed. The DWP has been very clear that the LISA is not a pension product, but the Treasury has proffered an automatic enrolment of people into pensions. Do the Government to review the situation and the impact on the auto-enrolment scheme annually to ensure that the introduction of lifetime ISAs does not have a negative impact on the success of automatic enrolment.

Similarly, not all employees will be auto-enrolled until February 2018, and the increase in minimum contributions to 8% will not be completed until April 2019. The level of drop-outs is relatively low among younger people, but we do not want to put anything whatsoever to jeopardise the maximum possible number of people enrolling or to provide any incentive for them to opt out. That is not an unreasonable position to take, given the implications of getting things wrong. We have therefore tabled amendment 6 to delay the commencement of the Bill until the end of April 2019, when all firms will have been auto-enrolled and the increase in minimum contributions to 8% will have been completed. The simple truth is that many people cannot afford to pay into both a pension and a LISA. In fact, many can do neither. The Work and Pensions Committee has warned the Government:

“Opting out of AE to save for retirement in a LISA will leave people worse off.”

Government messages on the issue have been mixed. The DWP has been very clear that the LISA is not a pension product, but the Treasury has proffered an alternative view.

New clause 3 is on independent financial advice. If the Government cannot get their position on the lifetime ISA clear, how will ordinary people in the street be clear about it? Compared with those of other pension plans,
the benefits of the LISA are relatively confusing and unclear when set in the context of the wider market. That is why we have tabled the new clause, which would place a duty on the Secretary of State to make regulations that ensured that all applicants for a lifetime ISA “have independent financial advice made available to them.”

In other words, the new clause’s purpose is to ensure that those opening a lifetime ISA for retirement savings receive independent financial advice.

Advice is crucial in purchasing any expensive product, in particular one involving post-retirement income. The advice would be offered automatically—through an opt-in service, for example—and the service provider would sign a declaration outlining the advice the applicant had received. Any provider would have to confirm the status of the applicant, whether they were enrolled in a workplace pension scheme, whether they had signed a declaration of financial advice and whether they planned to use the lifetime ISA for a first-time residential purchase.

Independent financial advice does not have to be expensive. In fact, to give an example, the Government could mandate a robo-advice scheme, which is an online platform where an individual can get independent financial advice. Given the putative simplicity of LISA that the Minister has championed, experts inform me that having a robo-advice scheme would be a reasonable course of action, although such a scheme would need safeguards. First, it should be backed up by accredited financial advisers. Secondly, the Government should take steps to ensure that no one company has the contract, something that is all the more important to avoid a repeat of the Concentrix scandal.

The Opposition believe that it is only right that anyone considering a lifetime ISA be given the opportunity to see its benefits compared with those of other schemes on the market. New clause 3 would ensure that people could make an informed choice with the benefit of independent financial advice. It would enable parity in the quality of advice for all those entering the scheme and mean that much-needed oversight and education about the benefits of the scheme would be in situ.

It goes almost without saying that a pension is perhaps one of the most important purchases a person makes. That issue has exercised the minds of many people in government, in the regulatory sector and in the products sector. The history of mis-selling has left a long, deep shadow across the financial products sector. We must take that into account—we cannot ignore it. With so many bodies from across numerous industries outlining their concerns that there is a risk that people will save into a lifetime ISA when it is not the most beneficial retirement savings option, I cannot see a reasonable argument against ensuring that applicants receive independent financial advice before opening an account.

 Millions of people have lost confidence in much of the sector to some degree or other. As witnesses in Committee alluded to, that is partly why when people are saving they do so in cash ISAs. They are not sure about stocks, shares and other products and so put their savings into products that give them a return of 0%, 0.1% and so on—up to 1% if they are lucky. We must create an environment in which people save and feel confident that they will get a reasonable return on their investment, especially if that investment is for their later years. That, too, is perfectly reasonable.

On new clause 4, the Opposition recognise that many people want to own their own home, and would encourage people to do so if that is what they wish, but we are concerned that the Government’s housing policy will only inflate housing prices further, and that the lifetime ISA will make things even more difficult in a housing environment that is already strained because of the limited numbers of houses being built nationwide. I will not even mention the huge cost of housing, particularly in London and the south-east. The average figure nationally is as much as £250,000 and over £500,000 in the capital. That is why new clause 4 would require the Government to conduct a review, within a year of the Act coming into force, of the potential impact of the lifetime ISA on house prices in the UK. It would also require that the review be made publicly available and be laid before both Houses of Parliament.

Evidence received in Committee, from the likes of Martin Lewis of MoneySavingExpert.com, acknowledged the potential popularity of the lifetime ISA but highlighted concerns about its potential impact and argued that unintended consequences of the scheme were a possibility and a concern. Worryingly, fewer homes were built in the last Parliament than under any other peacetime Government since the 1920s. The lifetime ISA might help to overhear a market already short of capacity. The Government’s priority should be to try to mitigate, not to add to, the problem. I do not consider that an unreasonable point either.

People are increasingly chasing a product in a market that has low supply levels. As I indicated in Committee, it so happens that that product is housing. The facts speak for themselves: the Government are almost two years through their five-year housing plan—not counting the previous five years—and still falling badly behind on their targets. If I recall correctly, the OBR’s assessment suggests a 0.3% inflationary effect on the housing market from products such as lifetime ISAs. If there are 100,000 house transactions a year, at £750 a time, that will add about £70 million a year to prices. If we are to implement policies that will affect an already overheating sector, it is important that we take into account their overall impact.

New clause 5 calls for a distributional analysis. As mentioned earlier, the Opposition’s underlying concern about the lifetime ISA is that it will do little to help those on low incomes to save. That is why we would like the Government to produce, within six months of the Act coming into force, an analysis of the distribution of benefits of lifetime ISAs and Help to Save accounts, including of the distributional effects between households at different income levels, genders, people with disabilities, and black and minority ethnic groups.

We should not forget that the Government’s huge cuts to universal credit will see 2.5 million people in working families lose as much as £2,000 a year, even after the Chancellor’s recent minor adjustments. It is difficult to imagine that such families will have a spare £50 a month to put into a Help to Save account. I made a point earlier about the low take-up. Those who can afford to save are generally better off, so the lifetime ISA will deliver subsidies to those who least need them. Meanwhile, the danger is that the Help to Save measure, which is specifically for universal credit and tax credit recipients, might encourage those on low incomes to
save money when it is not, at that point, necessarily in their best interests. According to the Women’s Budget Group, “Incentives to encourage saving—via the ‘Help-to-Save’ and ‘Lifetime ISA’ measures”—are “likely to disadvantage women” and tend to represent “a move away from collective provision of welfare.”

It is concerned “that in the future such individual accounts are used to provide an income during periods of caring, illness or disability...As women are both less likely to have funds to save and more likely to require time out for caring, they would be significantly disadvantaged by such an individualized approach as opposed to a collective system that enables redistribution.”

New clause 6 feeds into the overall debate about whether the lifetime ISA and Help to Save measure will be good value for money, particularly if they do not help those on low incomes and minority groups to save. We welcome the sensible measures to address the thorny issue of the low retirement savings of the less well-off; and anything that puts money into the pockets of middle and low earners is welcome, but I wonder how that aim sits alongside the Conservatives’ planned cuts—they are more like a heist—to universal credit. According to the OBR, the various pensions and savings policies introduced since 2011, including the lifetime ISA, will create a £5 billion lacuna in the public finances.

It is therefore imperative that the scheme benefits everyone in society, not disproportionately those who are already in a position to get on the housing ladder and save. It would be a real shame if the beneficiaries of the scheme were limited to those who were already able to afford to save and afford the deposit for a house. Given that the two policy announcements came at more or less the same time as cuts to tax credits, if the Government will not concede, an attempt to salve the conscience of a few Conservative Back Benchers after the chainsaw the Government have taken to tax credits. If the Government will not concede, we shall pursue new clauses 2 and 6 to a Division.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in the debate. I rise to speak to new clause 7 and amendments 7 to 11 and 13 to 22, which were tabled in my name and those of my hon. Friends.

We in the SNP accept that the Government will not be here to regret. That is why we will continue to scrutinise the lifetime ISA—a potential Trojan horse for the current pension system—and the Help to Save scheme, which is an attempt to salve the conscience of a few Conservative Members after the chainsaw the Government have taken to tax credits. If the Government will not concede, we shall pursue new clauses 2 and 6 to a Division.

The Scottish National party has consistently warned of the dangers of the Bill and its consequences for savers. The SNP is supportive of any initiative that promotes savings, but the lifetime ISA is a gimmick, as it will work only for those who can afford to save to the levels demanded by the Government to get the bonus. The LISA falls short of real pension reform, and it is a distraction to allow the Treasury access to taxes today rather than having to wait for tomorrow.

Savings into a LISA are made out of after-tax income; pension contributions are tax exempt and tend to receive employer contributions. Saving through pensions remains the most attractive method of saving for retirement. While anything that encourages saving for later life has to be welcomed, the danger is that the Government will derail auto-enrolment. Help to Save is another example: we agree working to encourage savings is welcome, but once again the UK Government are only scratching the surface, rather than really targeting those struggling to plan for emergencies or later life.

The Bill risks seducing young people away from investing in a pension by encouraging investment in a lifetime ISA. We have said before that no one investing in an ISA can be better off than someone investing in a pension. Why are the Government persisting with the Bill? Let us be clear: if we pass the Bill tonight, we could create circumstances in which young people might be sold a lifetime ISA when their interests would be better served by investing in a pension. That is what we will do if we pass this Bill.

I have laid out our clear concerns about the need for independent financial advice and assessment of the impact that right-to-buy schemes will have on the housing market and its cost-effectiveness. It is paramount that in due course the Government lay out clear evidence about who is using this scheme and, if necessary, amend it to allow wider participation. This scheme should not interfere with the continued success of auto-enrolment, so it should be delayed until 2018-19 when auto-enrolment is completed.

To be clear, this is not a scheme we would have initiated. We have huge reservations about any move by the Government away from a collective pension system towards an individualised payments system. That is a very slippery slope that the Government will not be here to regret. That is why we will continue to scrutinise the lifetime ISA—a potential Trojan horse for the current pension system—and the Help to Save scheme, which is an attempt to salve the conscience of a few Conservative Back Benchers after the chainsaw the Government have taken to tax credits. If the Government will not concede, we shall pursue new clauses 2 and 6 to a Division.
In Committee, we sought to make sure that safeguards were in place and that advice was available for applicants to pensions that risk, but for some reason the Government refused to accept our reasonable proposals. This evening, we are pressing new clause 7, which would require the Secretary of State to make regulations requiring all providers of LISAs or Help to Save accounts to provide applicants, at the point of application, with both advice on the suitability of the products to the individual and information on automatic enrolment and workplace pension schemes. Auto-enrolment is still in its infancy and is due to be reviewed next year, although we heard today that increases in payments to auto-enrolment schemes are now off the agenda. That too should be debated by the House and changed.

That has to be our priority for savings, but if we are not successful in pressing the new clause tonight, our only alternative is amendment 15, which would completely remove the LISA from the Bill. Our primary problem with the Bill as drafted is the LISA. While the UK Government rely on low opt-out rates from auto-enrolment to justify their claim that the LISA would not risk pension savings, we are not convinced. The Bill is a missed opportunity to focus on strengthening pension saving, rather than tinker with the savings landscape.

The amendments we tabled in Committee aimed to delay the LISA until safeguards were built in; they also highlighted the need for mandatory advice. The Government say that the LISA is a complementary product, not an alternative to pension saving, but they have given no real thought to the difficulties facing consumers in understanding their options and, for those who have savings, whether they are in the best product for their needs. Pensions are already confusing and complex; the LISA as it stands adds to that complexity.

We need to build trust in savings. That can only come if consumers have confidence in what is offered to them. A new suite of savings products that in many cases are inferior to existing offerings does not help build confidence in savings.

On Second Reading the Financial Secretary said:

“What is attractive about the lifetime ISA is that people do not have to make an immediate decision about why they are saving this money...people not having to make that decision at an early stage when they cannot see what is ahead.”—[Official Report, 17 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 607.]

That is an astonishing statement. Why is the Financial Secretary not saying that we ought to be encouraging pension savings? I get the point that we need to consider ways to help young people to get on the housing ladder. Perhaps we need to think about how investments in pension savings might help in that regard. That is one of the reasons I keep asking for the establishment of a pensions and savings commission, so we can look at these matters in a holistic manner. I keep making the point, and I make no apology for saying again, that nobody should be better off with a LISA than with pension savings.

The long-term cost of forgoing annual employer contributions worth 3% of salary by saving into a LISA would be substantial. For a basic rate taxpayer, the impact would be savings of roughly one third less in a pension scheme would have a pot worth £166,289.99 at a growth rate of 3%; in a LISA at the same growth rate the value would be only £112,646.75. That is a difference of over £53,000, and the difference would be even greater if wage growth was factored in. That is why we cannot support the Government tonight on the LISA elements of the Bill.

Without the introduction of advice, we are creating the circumstances in which mis-selling can take place. How can we stop someone being sold a LISA when a pension plan would be better for the consumer’s needs? We cannot. That, quite simply, is why the Bill is wrong. The Government ought to be thoroughly ashamed of themselves. They are creating the circumstances in which mis-selling can take place. I point the finger of blame at the Government for introducing this Bill and at every Member who is prepared to go through the Lobby tonight to support the Bill. Dwell on the example I gave where someone earning £25,000 per annum saving 4% of their salary could be as much as £53,000 worse off after 42 years. Who can honestly support that? That is not in consumers’ interests. It is de facto committing a fraud on savers in this country.

Today research has been published by True Potential. A poll of 2,000 employees showed that 30% of people aged between 25 and 40 would choose a LISA instead of a pension and that 58% of 25 to 34-year-olds would use their LISA for retirement savings. These statistics are the early warnings of the potential for mis-selling. Tonight, the House must vote to protect the consumer interest by backing new clause 15, which would delete LISAs from the Bill. Failure to do so will be a failure to take responsibility by each and every Member of this House.

I said on Second Reading:

“We would resist any further attempts to undermine pension saving and, specifically, to change the tax status of pension savings. That would be little more than an underhand way of driving up tax receipts—sweet talking workers to invest after-tax income in LISAs when their interests are best served by investing in pensions.”—[Official Report, 17 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 620]

The sheer fact that the use of LISAs for retirement savings will be encouraged will confuse the public that this is a pension product and could disincentivise retirement savings in what should be traditional products. The Government’s response that an amendment on advice would not work in practice, as it would create a barrier to accessing the LISA, is another quite extraordinary argument, as all that advice would do is make sure that consumers can make informed decisions. If there are consumers who choose to invest in a pension rather than a LISA product, I would be delighted, and so should the Government be.

The Government said it would be the role of the Financial Conduct Authority to ensure that sufficient safeguards are put in place. Specifically on advice, we welcome the FCA’s proposed protections: firms will be required to give specific risk warnings at the point of sale, which include reminding consumers of the importance of ensuring an appropriate mix of assets is held in the LISA; be savings of roof a LISA over a pension by the age of 60. For example, an employee earning £25,000 per annum and saving 4% of their income each year would see a difference in excess
great for the Government to treat it as an afterthought. There must be a formal mechanism to assist those seeking to increase saving, particularly where they are looking for a retirement product.

Even the Association of British Insurers, which cautiously welcomes the LISA, has said:

“LISA (and other ISA products) receives savings from money that is already taxed. This keeps the burden of taxation with working age people and takes money out of the real economy.”

This takes us back to why we are here and what the Government are proposing and why it is wrong.

As I also said on Second Reading:

“SNP Members welcome any reasonable proposals that encourage savings—we will work, where we can, with the UK Government to seek to encourage pension savings—but we very much see the Bill as a missed opportunity for us all to champion what we should be focusing on, which is strengthening pensions savings. Instead we have another wheeze that emanated from the laboratory of ideas of the previous Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), and his advisers, who had form on constantly tinkering with the savings landscape. The right hon. Gentleman may have gone from the Front Bench, but his memory lingers on with this Bill.

Let us recall what the former Chancellor said in his Budget speech this year:

‘too many young people in their 20s and 30s have no pension and few savings. Ask them and they will tell you why. It is because they find pensions too complicated and inflexible, and most young people face an agonising choice of either saving to buy a home or saving for their retirement.”—Official Report, 17 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 618-19.

6 pm

This assertion was not backed up by any evidence, and it was also half-baked. Young people under the age of 30 have the lowest level of opt-out rates of all those who have been automatically enrolled into workplace pensions. Department for Work and Pensions research has found that for the under-30s the opt-out rate was 8%, compared with 9% for 30 to 49-year-olds and 15% for those aged 50 and over. One would have thought that the then Chancellor and the Minister today would look at the DWP evidence and recognise that the assertion behind the justification for these measures was wrong. The fundamental principle that young people, when presented with a solution for pension savings, such as is now the case with auto-enrolment, are not saving for a pension is wrong. After much effort, auto-enrolment has been successful at encouraging young people to save. That is what we should be prioritising tonight and it is why we should vote to delete LISAs from this Bill.

Of course we know that the Treasury has been flying kites on moving from the existing arrangements for pensions—exempt, exempt—to one of taxed, exempt, exempt. This in my opinion would have a drastic impact on incentivising pension savings, but clearly from the Government’s point of view it would mean higher tax receipts today rather than pensions being taxed on exit, a wheeze from the previous Chancellor to deliver higher taxation income today rather than taxing consumption in the future—a modern-day reverse Robin Hood. Is it not the case that when this was kicked into the long grass, along came the Chancellor with proposals to achieve the same ends through the back door?

We must focus on pension savings and auto-enrolment. We must not undermine those efforts by inadvertently encouraging people to opt out through by consumers with new competing products. As has been stated by the likes of Zurich Insurance:

“There is a real danger that the LISA could significantly derail auto-enrolment and reverse the progress made in encouraging people to save for later life.”

I agree with that.

What is inconceivable is the reason why the Government are pushing ahead at such haste with the product: with the right hon. Member for Tatton gone from the Cabinet, why are they holding on to his big ideas? Providers have already said that they may not be ready for the implementation date of April 2017. Surely, to ensure quality and safeguards and overcome the challenges of complexity, at least the Government should accept our amendments to remove this ISA on these grounds.

Let me turn briefly to our Help to Save amendments. Currently those aged under 25 only qualify for working tax credits if they work at least 16 hours a week. Amendment 12 would ensure that any individual aged under 25 would qualify for a Help to Save product if they met other specified criteria. Amendments 10, 11, 8 and 9 would allow Help to Save to provide for “top-up” monthly payments above £50 so long as the average payment for every two months is £50. Amendment 14 would enable an auto-enrolment workplace saving scheme which would see an individual automatically signed up to a Help to Save account. He or she may opt out to stop money being deducted from their pay or benefits into a savings account.

Amendment 13 would ensure that individuals subject to a bankruptcy order would not be stripped of their assets. Amendment 7 would reduce the time before the holder of a Help to Save account would receive a Government bonus to six months.

We welcome the Government’s Help to Save, which we believe will help to boost the financial resilience of lower-income households. A survey conducted specifically about the scheme by StepChange demonstrates the importance of helping low-income households to save. Over three-quarters of respondents said that they need to pay an unexpected cost at least once a year, and on average it is worth between £200 and £300.

Without savings, many people have cut back on essentials such as food or heating, or had to borrow money. Boosting accessible cash savings among lower-income groups is vital to keep struggling families out of debt. Having £1,000 in accessible cash savings reduces the likelihood of a household falling into debt by 44%. If every household in the UK had at least £1,000 saved, it would reduce the number in problem debt by 500,000. However, in terms of the entire pensions and savings landscape, the Government could do much more.

We will support these aspects of the Bill. However our amendments simply add further security and protections for those the Government have not considered. StepChange is also calling for the Government to come forward with a plan to tackle anticipated low take-up of Help to Save, to ensure the maximum benefit among eligible households who are just about managing. Our amendment for those under 25 would help to do that.
We also support StepChange’s calls for Ministers to commit to bring forward a plan no longer than six months after Royal Assent of the Bill that shows how Help to Save will reach half of the eligible target group. The review of auto-enrolment should be used to look at how we can enhance the numbers and those eligible for pension savings, and more broadly how we can help families to build short-term savings.

I hope the Government reflect on our amendments. There must be advice for those looking to invest in LISAs. Failing that, I will be seeking to remove LISAs from this Bill through amendment 15. We must as a House protect consumers from any possibility of mis-selling. A failure to do so will see us back in this Chamber discussing the consequences, and it will be the Government at fault.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): This has been a wide-ranging debate, albeit with a relatively small number of speakers. Many of the arguments today were given a good airing during our Bill Committee discussions. I will try to address the key points raised by hon. Members, and will also set out why we think the Government amendments are necessary.

First, however, I want to touch on a point of policy that is of some relevance to the debate: a change to charges in the first year. We are making a small change to charges on early withdrawals from the lifetime ISA in its first year of operation, for the benefit of consumers. Although these rules will be set out in regulations, so do not affect the substance of the Bill before the House today, as a courtesy I thought some hon. Members would be interested, given the points raised in oral evidence to the Bill Committee.

The 25% Government charge on unauthorised withdrawals from the lifetime ISA recoups the Government bonus and applies a small additional charge. This is fair as it reflects the long-term nature of the product and ensures that individuals save into it for the intended purposes, protecting Government funds and taxpayers’ money. However, in 2017-18 only, the bonus will not be paid monthly, as it will be from April 2018 on, but will be paid as an annual bonus at year-end. This could create a difficult case where people face a 25% Government charge up to 12 months before they receive the bonus. We have listened to representations on this point, and so, to improve the product for consumers, I can confirm that there will be no Government charges in 2017-18.

If people want to withdraw from their lifetime ISA in 2017-18, they must close their account, and there will be no Government charge to do so. No bonuses will be paid on such closed accounts.

An individual who has closed their account will be able to open another lifetime ISA in 2017-18 and contribute up to £4,000 into it, if they wish to. From April 2018 the Government bonus will be paid monthly. This means that the 25% Government charge on withdrawals other than for a first-time house purchase, in the event of terminal illness or when the individual is over 60 will apply as per the overarching policy intention.

Government amendment 3 is about data sharing, and I wrote on this issue to the hon. Members for Bootle (Peter Dowd) and for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and copied in the rest of the Bill Committee. We have heard that the lifetime ISA will provide an eligible first-time buyer with a new choice in saving for their first home, in addition to the existing help to buy ISA scheme. Both schemes provide that generous Government bonus of 25% that can be put towards a first home.

As we set out when we first announced the lifetime ISA, we intend that individuals will be able to save into both a Help to Buy ISA and a lifetime ISA, but they will only be able to use the bonus from one of the schemes when they buy their first home. Amendment 3 introduces a new paragraph to schedule 1 to allow HMRC and the administrator of the Help to Buy ISA to share information about bonus payments and charge-free withdrawals so that those rules can be policed. It also provides appropriate safeguards and sanctions in relation to the use of account holders’ information, including a criminal offence for unlawful disclosure of that information, in line with HMRC’s established duty of taxpayer confidentiality. The amendment is straightforward and will ensure that the scheme rules on Government bonuses can be effectively administered. I hope that the House will accept it.

Government amendments 4 and 5 concern residency conditions for Help to Save. That is a targeted scheme, as we have heard, that will support lower-income savers by providing a generous Government bonus on their savings. It is only right that that Government bonus should be available for savings made while an account holder is in the UK or has an appropriate connection with the UK, such as Crown servants serving overseas. The Bill already provides that, as well as meeting conditions in relation to working tax credit or universal credit, an individual must be in the UK to open an account. However, it is currently silent on the rules that apply where an account holder leaves the UK during the four-year lifetime of an account.

The amendments address that situation by allowing regulations to provide that the monthly payment limit for Help to Save can be set at nil in certain cases. We intend to use that power to provide that an individual cannot make payments to an account, and cannot thereby earn additional Government bonus, when they are not in the UK or do not have the appropriate connection to the UK. That will be supported by a requirement to notify the account provider if an account holder leaves the UK. That approach broadly mirrors the arrangements currently in place for ISA accounts. The amendments also provide for a penalty where there is a failure to notify the account provider of such a change. However, that penalty will not apply where there is a reasonable excuse for the failure, and any person who receives a penalty will have the right to appeal. The House will have the opportunity to consider regulations dealing with eligibility for an account before the launch of the scheme.

These amendments allow an effective targeting of the generous Help to Save bonus, so that it can be earned only on savings made by individuals in the UK, or with an appropriate connection. On that basis, I hope that the House will accept them.

I will now respond to the non-Government amendments and new clauses. Again, we debated most of these issues at length in Committee. I will try not to recap all the arguments and to summarise the main ones.

New clause 3 and new clause 7 both concern advice for people opening either type of account. We have heard concerns that people may not get all the advice
they need. I have been clear that the regulation of providers is the role of the independent Financial Conduct Authority, which regulates ISA providers and will likewise set the framework for the Lifetime ISA. It is consulting on its approach at the moment. On 16 November, it set out its suggested approach.

The Government of course want to ensure that people have the information that they need to make important financial decisions. We will provide clear information on gov.uk as well as work with the Money Advice Service and its successor to ensure that they make appropriate and impartial information available. The risk of mandating that people receive independent advice is that it makes investing in these products prohibitively expensive for many people. In Committee, we talked about the cost associated with mandating financial advice of that nature. Therefore, although I understand the sentiment behind those new clauses, I urge hon. Members not to press them and instead look at what the FCA has recommended in its initial suggestions to us.

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: I will, although the hon. Gentleman spoke for 20 minutes on this subject. I will take a brief intervention.

Ian Blackford: Speaking for 20 minutes when consumers are exposed to risk is not unreasonable. Can the Minister tell me which workers who have access to auto-enrolment are exposed to risk is not unreasonable. Can the Minister tell me which workers who have access to auto-enrolment will be better off under a LISA than they would under a

Jane Ellison: I accept entirely, and it is evident from the hon. Gentleman’s speech, that he objects in principle to the lifetime ISA, but the matter before the House is whether we legislate for it, and the new clause I am addressing at the moment concerns financial advice. I have given examples of where the Government will be steering people towards advice. We are as keen as anyone that people have access to advice, but I urge him to look at the FCA consultation and what it has said, because it is the FCAs job to steer us in that regard.

6.15 pm

Amendment 2 is on Help to Save and credit unions as providers. I agree that credit unions play a key role in offering affordable, responsible credit to under-served communities. The Government are very keen to support them. The Conservative manifesto committed to support the credit union movement in making financial services more accessible. The Government supported the movement through the Department for Work and Pensions credit union expansion project. They have provided £38 million of funding to help the sector to modernise and to become self-sustainable. The coalition Government, as the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) will know, increased the maximum interest rates that credit unions can charge.

Amendment 2 concerns the potential for credit unions to offer Help to Save accounts. We have chosen to appoint NS&I as the single provider of Help to Save accounts, as it provides the most cost-effective way of ensuring national coverage for the scheme. As I have said, we acknowledge the important role that credit unions play in local communities, but it became clear during this summer’s consultation that a multiple provider model reliant on financial providers, including credit unions, offering accounts on a voluntary basis would not have guaranteed the UK-wide coverage that we wanted. By appointing NS&I as the scheme provider, we can achieve that nationwide account provision. It also means that we can work with a single provider to ensure that accounts are easily accessible by all the eligible people. That removes a significant administrative and compliance cost that would be associated with a range of different providers.

However, I want to stress—I hope this reassures the hon. Member for Walthamstow, who was not on the Bill Committee—that the Bill does allow HMRC to approve a credit union to be an authorised account provider, if we decide to adopt a multiple provider model of account provision in future. NS&I has been adopted in regulations as the provider at this stage, but nothing in the Bill would preclude expanding the provider model in future. I want to assure the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) that nothing precludes credit unions from being further involved in future.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): I listened with interest to the points made by Labour Members about credit unions. I am a member of the Bedford credit union. Will the Minister look specifically at this issue? I think the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) was saying that the Bill was an opportunity to expand the role of credit unions—they could be given almost a preferred provider status. When the Minister considers expanding the provider model beyond NS&I to include alternative providers, will she look specifically at expanding it solely to credit unions, rather than more broadly?

Jane Ellison: I hope that my hon. Friend will understand that it would be pre-emptive of me to make such a commitment at this stage. However, we have been clear that we think that credit unions have a big role to play. The primary legislation does not preclude them from being part of a multiple provider model in future. Indeed, my officials have been in constructive discussions with the credit union movement throughout the passage of the Bill. We are working with the credit union sector to ensure that the final design of Help to Save meets the needs of the target audience. I know that the Economic Secretary to the Treasury is looking forward to meeting the hon. Member for Harrow West and my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) to discuss the issue further with the Association of British Credit Unions. Therefore, this is not about excluding the credit union movement. We are in regular, constructive discussion with credit unions. We just feel at this stage that the amendment would not allow us to offer that simple nationwide model on the introduction of Help to Save.

Stella Creasy: I thank the Minister for what she is saying. Our concern is that savings are a critical part of credit unions’ ability to deliver the services that they provide. Her argument does not preclude the amendment that Co-op MPs have tabled. The conversations that she is talking about could then happen. There has been no suggestion that there would be any legislative bar. She is making the case for accepting the amendment in saying that it is exactly what she wants to do in future.
Jane Ellison: I am just saying that nothing in the Bill precludes that from happening now, so the amendment is unnecessary. We are in constructive discussions with the credit unions. They are not precluded from being part of a multiple provider model in future. I have laid out that, throughout the consultation, we identified that that was not a suitable model for the starting point. However, I honestly think that we are essentially coming at this from the same point of view. I hope that, in the light of what I have said, hon. Members will not press the amendment. As I say, we will continue to have those constructive discussions.

Amendment 7 seeks to pay the bonus every six months, rather than at the two and four-year mark of the Help to Save product. We believe that paying the bonus at two years and at account maturity strikes the right balance between giving people enough time to build up their savings and develop a savings habit and allowing them to access the bonus within an appropriate timescale. That is supported by evidence from similar savings schemes. Some Members will be aware that the savings gateway pilots showed that the optimal period for the saving habit to be embedded is two years.

I emphasise that people will still have full access to their savings with Help to Save, so even if they are able to save for only six months, they will still be entitled to receive a bonus at the two-year point or at maturity. I hope that that reassures hon. Members. Members that we have looked carefully at the issue. I accept that it is, to an extent, an judgment call, but evidence from the savings gateway pilots, as well as from other peer-reviewed research, shows that the optimal time for the saving habit to be embedded is about 19 to 24 months. We think that we have struck the right balance, so I hope that the amendment will not be pressed.

Amendments 8 to 11 centre on the contribution limits. Not many Members spoke specifically about the issue and we explored it well in Committee. It is about being able to contribute a two-monthly average of £50. Our consultation specifically addressed the question of whether individuals should be able to pay in more than the £50 limit in certain circumstances. Respondents were very clear that that would add complexity to the scheme, both for savers and for account providers. It is worth noting that the Office for Budget Responsibility-certified forecast suggests that people will deposit £27.50 into their accounts each month on average. The £50 monthly limit is adequate, so I hope that the amendments will not be pressed.

Amendment 12 centres on eligibility for under-25s. The issue was explored in Committee and it has been touched on briefly today by the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber. Our intention is to passport people into eligibility for Help to Save from working tax credit and universal credit. That is a well-established way of targeting people on lower incomes, and we think that it is the most simple and effective method for determining eligibility. Importantly, it removes the need for people either to complete a further means test to prove that they are eligible for an account or to contact the Government, both of which deter people from opening accounts. It also avoids additional costs associated with developing a new and complex eligibility checking system.

The hon. Gentleman also touched on amendment 13, which seeks to exempt bonuses from bankruptcy proceedings. Our approach is consistent with what we have done elsewhere. In the benefits system, for example, deductions are sometimes made to claims to repay debts. We think that, in reality, any accrued bonus represents an asset to the account holder and should be treated as such during any insolvency proceedings. Again, I urge Members not to press the amendment.

The hon. Member for Harrow West began by speaking to new clause 1, which focuses on save-as-you-earn and the payroll reduction, which is also the subject of amendment 14. Both proposed amendments seek to introduce rules to allow people to deduct automatically amounts from their salary into a Help to Save account. In fact, amendment 14 goes further by proposing the introduction of auto-enrolment for Help to Save, allowing employers or benefit-paying bodies to divert money from employees’ pay into a Help to Save account, unless they opt out.

As I said in Committee, we want the decision to save into a Help to Save account to be an active choice made by eligible individuals at a time that is right for them. For many, that will mean saving flexibly, putting aside what they can afford each month, rather than committing to having a fixed amount deducted each month from their salary. There is nothing in the Bill to stop an employer offering payroll deduction for Help to Save to their employees, but we do not intend to make it a statutory requirement for employers to offer payroll deduction for Help to Save. Automatic enrolment into workplace pensions must remain the priority for employers.

New clauses 2, 4, 5 and 6 seek to place a duty on the Government to review or publish analysis on certain aspects of the policies. In all cases we have already conducted an impact assessment published alongside the Bill. At the time of the autumn statement, we published a cumulative distribution analysis of all the policies implemented during the 2015-20 Parliament, including of the lifetime ISA and Help to Save. We believe that it is important to look at the cumulative impact of tax and spending decisions, rather than the impact of individual measures in isolation. The distributional analysis that the Government have published since 2010 has always taken that cumulative, rather than measure-by-measure, approach.

As with all Government policies, we will, of course, keep the lifetime ISA under review to ensure that it is meeting its objectives. Indeed, we already regularly publish a wide range of detail about the take-up of Government-supported savings accounts such as ISAs. We intend to take a similar approach to the lifetime ISA, so we have already done a lot in that regard.

We discussed the interaction with the housing market in Committee, as the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) has said. In essence, any impact that the lifetime ISA has on the housing market is likely to be very difficult to detect among other factors. As was said in Committee, the accusations that this product benefits only the wealthy do not bear scrutiny; given that the Help to Buy ISA has been used to buy homes worth on average £167,250, which is well under the property price cap. The accusations are not fair.

The interaction with automatic enrolment dominated the contribution of the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber. We covered the issue in detail in Committee, and I once again stress that the Government’s absolute commitment to automatic enrolment. It is wrong to say that we are seeking to derail it. The lifetime ISA—the
Treasury is clear on this—is designed to be a complement to automatic enrolment and workplace pensions, not a replacement. Our costings do not assume that people will opt out of their workplace pension in order to save into a lifetime ISA. Encouragingly, the figures show that the opt-out rate is very low so far. Taking all those things together, we do not think that the proposed amendments are necessary, so I urge hon. Members not to press them.

Amendments 15 to 22 would effectively cancel the lifetime ISA from the Bill. It is evident from my comments so far that I have no intention of accepting the amendments. It is clear that we have a disagreement in principle. The hon. Gentleman’s accusations against the measure bordered on hyperbole. He said that he is prepared to look at any reasonable proposal that helps people to save, but we know from the consultations on the complex subject of saving for the future that this is a product that will help many people save. It is a direct response to the comments made in response to a public consultation about the complexity of savings options.

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: No, I will not.

The proposal would also delay Help to Save for a year, disadvantaging the savers on low incomes who will benefit from the scheme. Like many hon. Members, I am passionate about the Help to Save scheme and want to see it go ahead as planned. I intend to work with all who have been mentioned—the credit unions, many financial inclusion charities, and the Churches—to ensure that we exceed the take-up target for Help to Save. I will be delighted if we vastly exceed the target, and that is my intention.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister is clearly not giving way. It is apparent to everybody else in the Chamber and I am sure that it is now apparent to the hon. Gentleman.

Jane Ellison: Amendments 15 to 22 seek to cancel half the Bill—I am not going to accept them. I refer the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber to the FCA’s consultation; I do not think that it would recognise his comments, and neither do I.

Amendment 1 would change the normal maturity period for Help to Save accounts from 48 to 24 months. In practice, people would be able to save into a Help to Save account for only two years rather than four. We designed the scheme so that people can save into a Help to Save account and get a Government bonus after two years, and then continue to save and receive a further bonus when the account matures after four years. We have done that because we want the target group to be able to save as regularly as other people and they may take longer to save towards that vital rainy day fund. It also provides an incentive for people to continue saving beyond two years, which fits with our objective to encourage people to develop a long-term saving habit. I hope that the amendment will not be pressed.

Finally, amendment 6 would delay commencement until April 2019, when automatic enrolment into workplace pensions will be fully rolled out. We have been very clear that we do not expect lifetime ISAs to drive opt-outs from pension saving. There is, therefore, no reason to delay. In fact, such a delay would disadvantage those who wish to open a lifetime ISA and who have been preparing for a 2017 launch. The hon. Gentleman completely disregarded the fact that self-employed people do not have the option of access to a workplace pension scheme. That came out in evidence to the Bill Committee. There was not a word about the self-employed.

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: No, I will not.

The proposal would also delay Help to Save for a year, disadvantaging the savers on low incomes who will benefit from the scheme. Like many hon. Members, I am passionate about the Help to Save scheme and want to see it go ahead as planned. I intend to work with all who have been mentioned—the credit unions, many financial inclusion charities, and the Churches—to ensure that we exceed the take-up target for Help to Save. I will be delighted if we vastly exceed the target, and that is my intention.

I am grateful for the level of interest that Members have shown in this important area of helping people to save. I appreciate that many amendments were tabled to try to improve the Bill, so in that collaborative spirit I hope that Members will accept Government amendments 3 to 5, which will improve the policies. I have set out why the other new clauses and amendments are unnecessary, and I hope that Members will be prepared not to press them to a vote as I have responded and provided reasons. I am confident that the Bill will further the Government’s aim of supporting people to save for their future in different ways, and I commend it to the House.

Mr Speaker: The final words in respect of this group of amendments are for the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas).

Mr Gareth Thomas: This debate has been short but interesting. I hope that Members will forgive me if I confine my brief remarks to the three amendments tabled in my name. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) made a characteristically excellent speech dwelling on the debt tsunami coming our way. She rightly alluded to the challenges that many credit unions face in providing a service through local employers to their employees.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) made an excellent speech from the Front Bench—perhaps inspired by listening to the works of Shostakovich, of whom he is a devotee. Given the numbers who might be eligible, he is rightly worried that the number of people who sign up for Help to Save will not be as great if credit unions are not included among the providers that can offer Help to Save.

I was interested by the Minister’s response, and I hear her concerns about new clause 1, which I look forward to exploring more in a meeting with the Economic Secretary to the Treasury. I was grateful to hear the Minister offer some reassurance on amendment 1 and the possible reduction to 12 months from 24 months. As a result, I will not press amendment 1 or new clause 1 to a Division.
I will, however, seek a vote on amendment 2 because I gently suggest to the Minister that she did not make a convincing case as to why credit unions should not be allowed to offer this product. It is clear that NS&I will be a good national provider, but it is unclear why credit unions cannot be given the opportunity to offer the product at the same time. Given all the effort and expense that the Treasury is going to, it seems odd not to take advantage of the opportunity that credit unions can provide to get more people signed up. In that spirit, I intend to press amendment 2 to a vote, but I will not press new clause 1 or amendment 1.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 2

IMPACT REVIEW: AUTOMATIC ENROLMENT AND PENSIONS SAVINGS

'(1) The Treasury must review the impact of Lifetime ISAs on workplace pensions automatic enrolment and pensions savings within one year of this Act coming into force and every year thereafter.

(2) The conclusions of the review must be made publicly available and laid before Parliament.'—(Peter Dowd.)

This new clause would place a duty on HMRC to review annually the impact of Lifetime ISAs on automatic enrolment.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 230, Noes 277.

The Speaker: The division shown on the back of the Division List is conclusive, and therefore no further votes may be taken on the Division.

[6.33 pm]

A YES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abboud, John
Abrahams, Debbie
Abu-Ras, Fatima
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Becket, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blencinas, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradin, Tracy
Brake, rh Tom
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, rh Mr Ronnie
Cambus, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Coaker, Vernon
Coaffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corryn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elliott, Tom
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiell, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glinon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holliern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Hug, Dr Rupa
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kerevan, George
Kinahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Maclaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marris, Rob
Marshden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McNally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Nicolson, John
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Siddiq, Tulip
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stamper, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Emily
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Twigg, Derek
Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Thangam Debbonaire

NOES

Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Dudbridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Frer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Garner, rh Sir Edward
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howlett, Ben
Huddledstone, Nigel
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkins, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCabe, Daniel
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Moris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherry

Morrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Oford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paton, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Picks, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pursgate, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Street, Rory
Strick, Mr Gary
Sturdy, Mel
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Symes, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Tipper, Edward
Tohill, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Parish, Neil
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tuig, rh Mr Andrew
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 1

Government Contributions to Lifetime ISAs

Amendment proposed: 15, page 1, line 1, leave out clause 1.—(Ian Blackford.)

See explanatory statement for amendment 16.


Division No. 105

[6.47 pm]

AYES

Arkless, Richard
Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Boswell, Philip
Brake, rh Tom
Brock, Deidre
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Durkan, Mark
Farron, Tim
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Hendry, Drew
Hosie, Stewart
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Lamb, rh Norman
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Mc Nally, John
McGiacomo, Callum
McDonald, Stuart C.
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Mullin, Roger
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Paterson, Steven
Pugh, John
Pritchie, Ms Margaret
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheppard, Tommy
Stephens, Chris
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Wilson, Corri

Tellers for the Ayes:
Owen Thompson and Patrick Grady

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Graham Stuart and
Mark Spencer

Carswell, Mr Douglas
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caffield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clevery, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Therese
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Dj芳ngly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic

Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardenena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, rh Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Information sharing between HMRC and others

Simpson, David
Shelbrooke, Alec
Sharma, Alok
Shapps, Grant
Selous, Andrew
Scully, Paul
Rutley, David
Rudd, Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sheelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David

(2) Information to which this sub-paragraph applies may be disclosed to the Administrator for use for the purpose of establishing whether or not an individual is eligible for a bonus under the Help to Buy: ISA Scheme.

(3) In this paragraph—
‘the Administrator’ means the person who for the time being is the Administrator under the Scheme Rules (as from time to time amended or supplemented) of the Help to Buy: ISA Scheme, and
‘the Help to Buy: ISA Scheme’ means the scheme of that name—
(a) announced by the Treasury in March 2015,
(b) launched on 1 December 2015,
(c) for which Scheme Rules were published on that date by the Treasury, and
(d) which is governed by those Scheme Rules (as from time to time amended or supplemented), and paragraph 1(1) (meaning of ‘bonus’) does not apply for the purposes of this paragraph.

(4) Information disclosed in reliance on sub-paragraph (2) may not be further disclosed to any other person without the authority of HMRC (which may be general or specific).

(5) If revenue and customs information relating to a person is disclosed in contravention of sub-paragraph (4) and the identity of the person—
(a) is specified in the disclosure, or
(b) can be deduced from it,
section 19 of the Commissioners for Revenue and Customs Act 2005 (wrongful disclosure) applies in relation to the disclosure as it applies in relation to a disclosure of such information in contravention of section 20(9) of that Act.

(6) In sub-paragraph (5) revenue and customs information relating to a person has the meaning given by section 19(2) of the Commissioners for Revenue and Customs Act 2005.

(7) A person who holds any information may disclose that information to HMRC or an officer of Revenue and Customs if the disclosure is made for the purposes of the exercise of any of the functions of HMRC, or an officer of Revenue and Customs, under section 1 and this Schedule.

(8) This paragraph does not limit the circumstances in which information may be disclosed apart from this paragraph.”—

(Amy Ellison.)

It is proposed that a saver buying their first home who has both a Lifetime ISA and a Help to Buy: ISA will get a government bonus from one only of those accounts if they withdraw money from both for their purchase. To enable the necessary cross-checking, this Amendment would allow HM Revenue and Customs (“HMRC”) to provide the Administrator of the Help to Buy: ISA Scheme with information about withdrawals from Lifetime ISAs. The Amendment would also allow anyone to provide HMRC with information for use by HMRC in carrying out their Lifetime ISA functions.

Schedule 2

HELP-TO-SAVE ACCOUNTS: FURTHER PROVISION

Amendment proposed: 2, page 17, line 36, at end insert “(d) a credit union.”—(Mr Gareth Thomas.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 227, Noes 279.

Division No. 106] [7 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Tellers for the Ayes:  

Vicky Foxcroft and Thangam Debbonaire

NOES

Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Carmichael, Neil
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Dr James

Savings (Government Contributions) 12 DECEMBER 2016

Bill

Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holliern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Thomas
Hug, Dr Rupa
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Kane, Mark
Keeley, Barbara
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, rh Mr Angus Brendan
Macaggtagurt, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marris, Rob
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christopher
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Nicollson, John
O’Farrell, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff

Adams, Nigel
Afrifiye, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Arger, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thompson, Owen
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Elidih
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Wilson, Sammy
Winnick, Mr David
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel
Question accordingly negatived.

Amendments made: 4, page 18, line 20, after “amount”, insert “(which may be nil)”.

This amendment would allow Treasury regulations to specify that the maximum monthly amount that may be paid into an account is nil in certain circumstances (for example where the saver is not in the UK).

Amendment 5, page 19, line 15, at end insert—

“Account provider to be notified about absence from UK

11A (1) Treasury regulations may, in connection with any stipulation that (directly or indirectly) links entitlement to bonus to the UK (a) impose duties to notify the account provider about absences of the individual from the United Kingdom; (b) make provision for the imposition of a penalty, which must not exceed £300, for failure to comply with a duty imposed under paragraph (a).

(2) Paragraphs 44, 45, 46(1), 47 to 49 and 52 of Schedule 36 to the Finance Act 2008 (penalties: liability, assessment, appeals and enforcement) apply in relation to a penalty under regulations under sub-paragraph (1)(b) as they apply in relation to a penalty under paragraph 39 of that Schedule.

(3) An assessment of a penalty under regulations under sub-paragraph (1)(b) must be made—

(a) within the period of 12 months beginning with the date on which the failure first came to the attention of an officer of Revenue and Customs, and
(b) within the period of six years beginning with the date on which the person became liable to the penalty.

(4) Without prejudice to paragraph 49(2) of Schedule 36 to the Finance Act 2008 (enforcement) as applied by sub-paragraph (2), regulations under sub-paragraph (1)(b) may (in particular) provide for a penalty under such regulations to be deducted from amounts to be paid by way of bonus in respect of the Help-to-Save account concerned.”—(Jane Ellison.)

This amendment would allow Treasury regulations to impose duties requiring that account providers are informed about an individual’s absence from the UK, where that absence could be relevant to the amount of bonus which is payable in respect of a Help-to-Save account.

Third Reading

7.11 pm

Jane Ellison: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken the time to scrutinise the Bill during its passage through the House for the good, constructive debates, which have been very helpful. We want to make it easier for everyone to build up savings, to meet their ambitions and to feel secure in their personal finances, and we have already set to work to make that the case. We put an end, for example, to 17 million people having to pay tax on the interest they received on their savings and we announced the biggest ever increase in the Isa allowance, to £20,000 from April next year. This Bill, legislating as it does for the lifetime Isa and the Help to Save account, carries on that hugely important work.

As we have heard, the lifetime Isa provides a new option for young people looking to save for the long term. It is a positive move for savers that complements pensions and is yet another way in which we are supporting people who are doing the right thing and putting money aside.

Help to Save has received cross-party support in the House. We know why this is so important. Research from the Centre for Social Justice estimates that 3 million low-income households have no savings at all, so we can be in no doubt that moving forward with this account is a hugely important step.

The Savings (Government Contributions) Bill is important, and its passage through the House has been met with thoughtful and constructive challenge. We have debated a number of important principles during our deliberations, but the Bill is fundamentally about people who are trying to save for the future so I have no hesitation—indeed, I take great pleasure—in commending it to the House.

7.13 pm

Peter Dowd: I echo the Minister’s sentiments about the scrutiny the Bill has received. I am grateful to the witnesses who came to our sessions, as well as for all the written evidence, informal information and contact that we received.

Of course, the provisions are in two parts: the lifetime Isa and Help to Save. No one has any objection to helping people to save; it is a question of how to do it. We are not convinced that the Bill will help people to save. We do not think that there is sufficient evidence to back up what the Minister said and we do not think that it sorts out the problem with the shortage of housing. It sets aside £1.8 billion by 2019-20, there are questions about its value for money, and we think that it complicates the market and might introduce a Trojan horse. Not everybody is convinced about it.

I am not sure that Help to Save does the business for those on a low income. It comes in the wake of major cuts to tax credits and only puts a little drop back into a very big ocean. The Government should listen to what many people, including our witnesses, have said. Nevertheless, we accept that we need to help people save for the future, and all the information that has been provided to us sets the scene for continued future debates. I thank the Minister for her helpfulness and civility throughout the process.

7.15 pm

Ian Blackford: I must say that I think we will repent of this legislation in due course. We cannot get away from all the evidence that was presented to us. The evidence from the Association of British Insurers makes it abundantly clear that anyone who has the opportunity to invest in a workplace pension will be worse off investing in a LISA than investing in their pension. I listened to the Minister talking about those who are self-employed and who do not have the opportunities and advantages of auto-enrolment when what we should have been doing was introducing legislation to deal with that problem.

We have the opportunity to do that when we review auto-enrolment next year. There is no need for this legislation for ordinary people; they will not benefit from the LISA. I put it to the House that this will reward those who have already maxed out their pension schemes by giving them another opportunity that will help them through this Government bonus. It is not so much a LISA as what we would call a “Rupert”—a really useful perk for extremely rich Tories. They are the only people who will benefit from the Bill.

When it comes to what is really important, I am delighted that True Potential has published its evidence today. Let me give two statistics from that. First, 30% of people aged between 25 and 30 would, if given the opportunity, choose a LISA instead of a pension, and 58% of 25 to 34-year-olds would choose the LISA for retirement savings. We know that those with the opportunity to invest in a pension will always be better off. As I said on Second Reading, the Government have wilfully created circumstances in which young people in this country will be mis-sold LISAs. The Government should be utterly ashamed.

7.18 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I was a member of the Bill Committee and I made many of the points I wish to make at that time. I was not able to be in the Chamber for the first part of this debate, but I wanted to say a few words in support of what we have heard from the Opposition Front Bench. My hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) and the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), speaking for the Scottish National party, have expressed strong words of scepticism about the Bill. I reinforce those words.

The very poorest need a much bigger state pension. For many people, a compulsory earnings-related state pension scheme would be much better value and would
guarantee that everybody saved some of their earnings for a decent old age. That would be a much more positive way forward. I echo what has been said by the Opposition Front Benchers and am grateful for this opportunity to speak.

7.19 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins). I did not have the privilege of serving on the Bill Committee, but I spoke on Second Reading and on Report. I welcome Ministers’ commitment to continue to engage with credit unions, which was the primary issue I sought to raise.

There is one issue we did not address in relation to Help to Save. With a national provider—National Savings & Investments—it would be relatively easy to disaggregate the data on who is taking advantage of the Help to Save product and to publish them in an anonymised form. We could track the postcodes to see where people are taking advantage of it. I raise that issue in the context of work that the Treasury is doing with the British Bankers Association to encourage banks to publish data about what financial services products are being offered to whom and who is taking advantage of them. The banks have been forced, reluctantly, to reveal where they are lending, but the information being provided is not yet perfect—we are on a journey with the banks.

One thing the Treasury could do once it gets this Bill through both Houses, as it seems likely to, is to require NS&I to publish on a postcode basis where people are taking up the Help to Save product. I commend that point to Ministers, and I hope they will take it up. I also hope that Members of the other House will explore this additional issue in a little more detail.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

7.21 pm

Welfare Cap

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): I beg to move,

That pursuant to the Charter for Budget Responsibility: Autumn 2015 update, which was approved by this House on 14 October 2015, under Section 1 of the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011, this House agrees that the breach of the Welfare Cap in 2019-20 and 2020-21, due to higher forecast inflation and spend on disability benefits, is justified and that no further debate will be required in relation to this specific breach.

Today’s motion is about Government accountability for welfare spending before the House and, indeed, before the public. This debate is about the welfare cap. I hope right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House will agree that our welfare system is about more than just the numbers. We have a set of principles to build a welfare system that works for everyone. We need to look beyond just benefits, and to work with employers, health professionals and the voluntary sector. We need to ensure the system supports people to get into work, to stay in work and to progress in work. We must also offer care for the minority of people who cannot work, whether through sickness, disability or personal circumstances.

We introduced the welfare cap in 2013 to strengthen control of welfare spending and improve parliamentary accountability for that level of spending. The welfare cap is an important part of our fiscal framework, and it plays a crucial role in delivering our commitment to a sustainable and affordable welfare system. Our welfare reforms are creating a system that makes sure that work always pays and that is fair to those who receive welfare but also to those who pay for it.

The independent Office for Budget Responsibility assessed performance against the welfare cap at autumn statement, and it is now forecast that the current cap will not be met in each year until 2020-21. A similar debate was held in the House on 16 December 2015 on the breach of the welfare cap in the years 2017-18 and 2018-19, resulting from the decision not to pursue the tax credits measure proposed at summer Budget 2015.

The House agreed that the breach of the cap in the earlier years of the forecast period was justified and that no further debate would be required on that specific matter. Therefore, the motion we are putting before the House today seeks agreement on the justification of the breach of the cap in the later years of the forecast period—2019-20 and 2020-21.

I would now like to outline the reasons why the cap is forecast not to be met in those years. This is due to increased forecast inflation and spend on disability benefits, partly due to the decision not to pursue the personal independence payment measure proposed at Budget 2016. As with our decision not to pursue the tax credits measure, the Government have once more listened and responded to public concerns, and we have decided not to pursue the changes to the personal independence payment. Higher forecast inflation is another factor contributing to the cap not being met in 2019-20 and 2020-21. In view of the uncertainty facing the economy, inflation is now forecast to be higher than when the cap was set at summer Budget 2015.

I would like to reassure the House that the latest forecasts do not mean that welfare spending is out of control. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced at autumn statement, we will deliver the welfare savings
We have already announced and legislated for. I would also like to repeat that the Government have no plans for further welfare savings in this Parliament.

The Government believe that work is the best route out of poverty. That is why we want a welfare system that helps people who can work to get back into work, but that also supports those in most need. Our welfare reforms are working. Employment has risen by 2.8 million since 2010, and is now at a record high of 74.5%. Unemployment is at an 11-year low. Universal credit is revolutionising the welfare system, enshrining the principle that working more always pays more. Through the benefit cap, we are restoring fairness to the system, while ensuring there is a clear incentive to work.

There are now over 1 million fewer people on out-of-work benefits. Some 3.5 million disabled people are now in employment, and in the last three years, the number of disabled people in work has increased by nearly 600,000. We also want a welfare system that is a strong safety net for those who need it—

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Could the Minister confirm whether it is still the Government’s commitment to halve the disability employment gap by 2020?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman will have heard my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work at her recent Select Committee appearance. She has made the point repeatedly that we are determined to reduce the disability employment gap, and we are working incredibly hard to do that, but we acknowledge that more needs to be done.

The welfare cap plays an important role in ensuring that the welfare bill is sustainable and affordable. We introduced the cap to allow us to bring welfare spending under control, and we have done so. The system we inherited was unaffordable and unsustainable. Under Labour, welfare spending increased by almost 60% in real terms. The number of households where no member had ever worked nearly doubled, and unemployment went up by 457,000.

As part of our continuous commitment to a sustainable welfare system, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced at autumn statement the introduction of a new welfare cap, alongside a new fiscal framework. The Government are firmly committed to returning the public finances to balance as soon as is practicable. Given the uncertainty we face, it is important to allow for enough flexibility to support the economy. That is why we are changing the fiscal framework, and why we are introducing a new welfare cap as part of that.

The new cap sets a target for welfare spending in 2021-22, with a pathway for welfare spending in all the years before that. The new cap is set in line with the latest autumn statement forecast. The scope of the new cap remains unchanged. The Office for Budget Responsibility will continue to assess performance against the new cap, and if the cap is assessed as breached, Ministers will still need to hold a debate and justify the breach in the House, or to propose steps to bring spending within the level of the cap.

The House will have the opportunity in due course to debate and agree the new fiscal framework, including the new welfare cap, which was put forward by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor at autumn statement. I commend the motion to the House.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to be here when you are in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As Members will probably gather, I take a slightly different view from the Minister, and I will go on to the details in a moment. However, as the Minister acknowledged, this is the second year the Government have been forced to come to the House to explain their failure not just in breaching their own social security cap but on the economy.

As a quick point of clarification, the Government spent £130 billion more between 2010 and 2015 than the previous Labour Government spent between 2005 and 2010. So this Government have spent more. That is absolutely—[Interjection.] It is very interesting that Government Members should take that approach, but I will go on. It turns out that the long-term economic plan is really nothing more than a slogan, and that probably “long-term economic failure” would have been slightly more apt.

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury (Guy Opperman): More jobs.

Debbie Abrahams: I will come on to the record number of jobs. The hon. Gentleman is trying to—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We cannot have sedentary interventions from the Whips’ Bench. [Interjection.] We just cannot, even when there is nobody else here.

Debbie Abrahams: That is fine, Madam Deputy Speaker—I have no problem with answering the hon. Gentleman. He said, “More jobs”, but 80% of the increase in employment is in self-employment, and half—[Interjection.] These are the facts. Half of those in self-employment are earning less than the living wage.

As we saw in the autumn statement, growth is down, borrowing is up—again—inflation is on the rise, deficit targets are hopelessly missed, and productivity is flatlining. The Office for National Statistics has described this as “unprecedented”, with the worst levels of productivity since the second world war. Of course, productivity is the driver of wage growth, so we are seeing stagnant wage growth as well as precarious levels of employment.

The Government have failed on every single one of their fiscal targets, so much so that at the autumn statement they had to define a new set. They promised us an economy based on high wages and lower social security spending where work always pays, but in over six years they have done nothing to deliver the high-skill, high-wage, productive economy that this country desperately needs to compete in the global market. As a result of their failures, the Government have once again breached their own welfare cap—not just last year, not just this year, but every year for a full five-year term. For the remaining years of this Parliament, the Government will miss their cap by £5 billion, £6 billion, £7 billion and £8 billion respectively—a record of the complete and utter failure of their economic strategy.

Instead of reforming the social security system to reflect the reality of today’s flexible labour market, the Government have sought to cover up their economic
incompetence and take it out on the working poor, the sick and the disabled, raining down austerity on the most vulnerable in our society. We have had six wasted years while the poorest have picked up the bill, with a full four years of failure yet to come. This is a far cry from the former Chancellor’s proclamation in 2014 that “The welfare cap marks an important moment in the development of the British welfare state” and “ensures that never again can the costs spiral out of control”.—[Official Report, 26 March 2014; Vol. 578, c. 374-381.]

All the evidence is to the contrary. This debate is further testament to the Government’s complete failure to manage the economy or—and this is the most important point—to tackle any of the drivers of social security spending. It is incredible to watch the Government as they bound aimlessly from one broken promise to the next. Whatever their favourite slogan—“We’re all in it together”, “Fighting against burning injustices”, or “A Britain for everyone”—it is clear that gimmicks and grandstanding are all the Government are capable of.

In the motion, the Government claim that they could not meet their own rules due to spending on social security support for disabled people and higher than expected inflation. As ever, they are pointing the finger of blame at the most vulnerable rather than apologising for their own economic mismanagement. Let us examine the facts in a bit more detail. At the autumn statement, the Office for Budget Responsibility predicted that the Government will spend £120.5 billion in 2019-20 and £123.2 billion in 2020-21 on social security considered within the cap. Of this, the OBR estimates that changes in forecasts for CPI—consumer prices index— inflation will increase spending to 2021 by £0.8 billion in total. At less than a percentage point of total spending inside the cap, this can hardly be said to be the major driver of the Government’s failure to keep their promises. The Government have lost control of the economy, if they ever had control of it in the first place, and failed to tackle the key drivers of social security spending other than pensions—low-paid work and high housing costs.

Furthermore, the Government’s claim that increased disability spending will cause a breach of the cap at the end of the Parliament is just another attempt to point the finger at sick and disabled people. I admit—I am pleased about this—that there has been no language from Ministers around the “shirkers and scroungers” narrative that we have seen in recent years. That is a very welcome move. However, I am not clear whether this extends to press releases from Conservative Campaign Headquarters or to some of the coverage in less responsible sections of the media. We must be careful of our language in this respect. Even if derogatory terms such as “shirker” and “scrounger” are not used, what is implied by “incentivising” people who have been found not fit for work? Is the implication that they are at home avoiding work—that it is their choice to stay at home instead of being in productive work? That is offensive to very many people.

Instead of blaming everyone else for their mess, the Government should start taking responsibility. It is not just Labour Members who are making these points. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has described the approach of the past six years as a “grave and systematic violation” of disabled people’s rights. We have heard similar comments from our own Equality and Human Rights Commission, the Government’s Social Security Advisory Committee, and indeed, Government Back Benchers. All have raised concerns about the lack of evidence in many of the Government’s social security policies, particularly regarding their punitive effects. I am pleased that the Minister said that the Government had taken the view that because of the implications that changes to tax credits would have for the working poor, they had decided not to proceed with them, but what about work allowances around universal credit? We are talking about the same people. The taper rate will make a difference of a couple of hundred pounds a year instead of the net effect of over £2,000 a year.

I want to explore some of the real reasons the Government have totally failed to meet their promises. They have failed because they have not tackled the drivers of social security spending. Rather than creating a strong economy with high wages, progression in the labour market, affordable housing and accessible childcare, they have starved the economy of much-needed investment, leaving us all worse off after six wasted years of austerity. This is not just our analysis; in every regard, the evidence speaks for itself. On housing, under this Government we are projected to spend more than £20 billion a year, every year, on housing benefit, which, after pensions, is the second largest spending area of social security spending. This amounts to more than £100 billion spent over the course of this Parliament, with nearly half going straight into the pockets of private landlords.

All the while, the Government’s own figures show that the number of affordable homes being built has slumped to a 24-year low. Indeed, research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggests that we need to be building 80,000 affordable homes a year to meet demand and keep the current spend on housing benefit stable. This year, we have managed to build just 30,000. Instead of focusing on reducing the housing benefit bill by building affordable homes, the Government have chosen to force the sale of the remainder of our socially rented stock, worsening the housing crisis and driving up housing benefit spend. This is one of the key reasons they have breached their own cap.

On top of this, there is the squeeze on in-work support for people in low-paid jobs. We will spend over £50 billion on tax credits in the two years covered in this motion. Why? Because the Government have failed to ensure that wages keep up with the cost of living, leaving many working people relying on top-ups to get by. Real wages are now set to remain lower in 2021 than they were in 2008, yet the Tories still turn their backs on working people by trying to cut the amount of tax credit support available under their failed austerity plans.

Likewise, under universal credit the Government have weakened incentives to work by cutting billions—about £10 billion over the life of this Parliament—from the programme’s work allowance under their austerity plans. Their meagre reduction in the taper rate will make a difference of a couple of hundred pounds a year instead of the net effect of over £2,000 a year. The taper rate will make a difference of a couple of hundred pounds a year instead of the net effect of over £2,000 a year. The taper rate will make a difference of a couple of hundred pounds a year instead of the net effect of over £2,000 a year.
people need. That would ensure that people get a fair and proper wage for a working day, while reducing the expenditure of the state.

Our Chancellor is apparently not capable of making such an obvious decision, despite the fact that the Living Wage Commission has shown that the Government’s national living wage falls well short of providing a decent standard of living. The Chancellor used his autumn statement to chop 1½p an hour off the previously promised wage increase, at a cost of about £200 a year to the average worker. That is all in the context of flatlining pay, which leads to the average wage being £1,000 lower in 2020 than was predicted at the last Budget. How can we ever expect to reduce social security expenditure when the Government will not act on wages?

High wages alone will not clear up the mess, however. We also need to act on progression in the labour market if we are to tackle the drivers affecting social security spending. The JRF has shown that four out of five low-paid workers are still low paid 10 years later. There is no automatic progression to higher pay. That is further proof of the deep structural problems we face in our labour market.

Finally, we should turn our attention to the disability employment gap, which the Government claimed they would halve by 2020. I am grateful for the intervention from the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on that point. The gap narrowed from the end of last year, but it is now back up to the level it was just before the general election last year. Perhaps the Government’s plan to force people into work before they are ready by cutting the employment and support allowance can be added to the mounting examples of the Government’s flawed strategy.

Why have the Government not acted to improve the retention of disabled people in their current jobs? The Resolution Foundation has shown that doing so could reduce the number of people transitioning from employment to health-related inactivity, which was 350,000 in 2015. Keeping disabled people in their jobs would surely be a better strategy to bring down social security spending than slashing support for those who are further away from the labour market. But no; sadly, the Government have not been able to see that far, and their record on supporting retention is very poor.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): This is an important issue. The Office for Budget Responsibility has said that the Government will breach their target in each year of its forecast. Does the hon. Lady acknowledge that that means that the welfare cap is not working, because the Government cannot look after those who are genuinely ill and in need of benefits? An example of that is Concentrix, where lots of people were put on benefits and then taken off benefits. The number of such people, when it comes to the cap, is very difficult to forecast, and the Government need to forecast that better.

**Debbie Abrahams**: That is an interesting question, and I would have to look at the figures. I have tried to show that the high cost of housing is a real issue, as is low-paid work. There are a number of factors, but those are the key drivers. The Government really should have been more careful in their impact assessment when they set out their policy in the first place.

To conclude, this breach of the Government’s self-imposed welfare cap every year for five years is further proof of their utter failure on the economy. They have refused to act on the fundamental areas that are driving the cost of social security spending, and they have made bankrupt attempts to meet their targets on the back of the most vulnerable. Only Labour has an economic strategy that will bring the costs of social security down without fraying the safety net that we all rely on. Now is the time to invest in the housing we need, offer a decent wage for a working day and support people to find a job, keep a job and progress in their chosen work. We will transform our social security system to ensure that, like the NHS, it is there for all of us in our time of need, as part of our plan to create a stronger, fairer economic settlement for all in our country.

7.44 pm

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this important debate. I pay tribute to the Minister, who showed that she had a genuinely deep understanding of the issues. She already has a record of being very willing to engage, particularly with charitable groups, which have a wealth of experience. We, as a Government, would do well to listen to them and allow them to help to shape future policies.

The debate is important because it focuses our minds. We have set a clear marker, and we have to justify any deviation from our original plans. It was interesting to listen to the last speech. The shadow Minister said that the Government have spent something like £130 billion more, but she then criticised us for not spending sufficient money in basically every area. The two things did not quite marry up. It is right to focus our minds, because under the previous Labour Government welfare was simply left to drift. The number of workless households doubled and an extra 470,000 people were abandoned to unemployment. Those are not just statistics; they represent real people who were in desperate need of the right support.

Through our strong economic growth—I am not sure what the shadow Minister was referring to, because it is still the strongest of any major developed economy—we have seen record employment. That is not just a south-east phenomenon; it has happened in every region of the country. I know that hon. Members are all desperate to know the situation in my constituency: 8,100 more people are in work since the general election, and that is even larger than the number of people who go to the county ground to watch the mighty Swindon Town. Unemployment is at an 11-year low.

We have introduced the national living wage, directly benefiting 2.75 million of our lowest earners. The income tax threshold rises year on year, taking 3.2 million people out of paying any income tax at all. While wages have grown, on average, about 2% this year, the wages of the lowest earners have risen by an average of 6%. That is in addition to the welcome extension of free childcare, which has created more opportunities for people to work.

The recent Green Paper announcement gives us a real opportunity to build on the progress that is being made, particularly if we look at the 590,000 more disabled people in work in the last three years. Now, 48% of disabled people are expected to be in work—up from
44% when we first came into office. We still have much further to go, but charitable groups and people who work in this area are encouraged by the fact that we are going in the right direction. The key thing is to deliver tailored individual support, because for those who are still looking for work, there are challenges. It is not as simple as learning how to create a CV and taking part in interview training. We are right to look at delivering more tailored support, to make further progress in delivering more people into work and thus reducing welfare spending.

We are right to identify that we have to do joined-up work with health. Many people who are now looking for work will also have to navigate health challenges, and they need support from the beginning. We are, rightly, introducing the small employer offer to engage proactively with employers on providing opportunities. People who play by the rules and work with the support on offer need the opportunity to go into work at the end of the process.

The announcement on disability apprenticeships and the increase in funding for Access to Work and universal credit, which has universal support across all parts of the House, reinforce the point that work should always pay and recognise a welfare system that is fair to those who receive it and to those who pay for it. Crucially, we are removing the 16-hour cliff-edge rule and providing, on average, 13% more time for the claimant to look. Most importantly, for me, for the first time ever a claimant has a named contact who can help them to navigate the process of not just looking for work, but dealing with all the different forms of benefit and the extra support they will need.

Crucially, when a claimant goes into work, the named contact will continue to provide support. Until now, we, as a society, would help people to get into work and wish them all the best, and that would be our last contact with them unless they came back to look for work again. Now we realise that those people, many of whom are taking their first step into work, may need support. They may lack confidence. If they attend work regularly and engage in the right way, their named coach can help them to try to increase their hours, increase their responsibility and earn more money in work.

Jim Shannon: One of the things I would like to see in my constituency and across the whole of the United Kingdom is incentives for small and medium-sized businesses, which, because they are small, find it difficult to support disabled people in gaining employment. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that small and medium-sized businesses have so far not been encouraged to do just that?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that very important point. Large employers, with their well-resourced HR and highly educated personnel teams, are very good at making such changes—they are often small changes—to take full advantage of the disabled people who are looking to work and have the great skills and abilities needed to fill the existing skills gaps. Small and medium-sized businesses often do not have the necessary confidence and skills, and may not even be aware of the talent that is available.

The small employer pilot is so important because it is about going around industrial parks, business parks and shops to ask, “Where are your skills gaps? We will match them to the people who are looking for work.” We have had some really encouraging results from the pilots. I had a Disability Confident event in my constituency, and the Shaw Trust managed to place a further 22 people. We got small and medium-sized employers who had never thought about doing this to come forward and say, “These are our skills gaps. Please help find people for us.”

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman rightly makes the point that the rate of employment among disabled people has risen, but the overall employment rate has risen as well, so the disability employment gap has not been reduced. Why has there not been any progress on that issue?

Justin Tomlinson: The right hon. Gentleman has been very diligent on this issue, and he is determined to be proactive in supporting disabled people to have such an opportunity. The reality is that the growing economy is benefiting everyone, but perversely, the last time we had a recession, the disability gap actually shrank because non-disabled people came out of work at a quicker rate than the disabled people. If we had a recession, we would not celebrate the closing of the gap if people were also coming out of work.

Greater minds than mine will now have to decide what way to go. For what it is worth, I think the only thing that matters is that, as quickly as possible, more disabled people should have an opportunity for work year on year. We should be looking at ways to do that. When we came to office, the then Prime Minister said that we wanted to halve the disability employment gap, which meant employing about 1 million more disabled people. We should be trying to get to that target as quickly as possible, by looking at it annually. Stakeholders and charities are keen that we can demonstrate on an annual basis that we are making real, tangible progress. So far, with 590,000 more disabled people in work in the past three years, progress has been good, but there is still much more that needs to be done.

The final area I want to mention is disability benefits. As a Government, we now spend £3 billion more a year, which is welcome. That recognises the fact that under the old system of disability living allowance, only 16.5% of claimants accessed the highest rate of benefit, while under PIP, the figure is about 22.5%, because the system recognises hidden impairments better, particularly mental health ones. It is right that we are getting support to the most vulnerable people in society as quickly as we can.

However, I have an ask. Everybody in Parliament recognises that we have a growing challenge with mental health conditions in this country. Whether in relation to people in work, people trying to get into work or people in their everyday lives, about one in four people will have a mental health condition at some point. I suspect whoever was in government would, like our Government, look to committing additional funding to support people with mental health conditions. One of the challenges is that no one has quite resolved the best way to direct and provide such support. There are lots of different pilots, but we have a real opportunity in that the one way in which we are identifying people with mental health conditions is through the PIP benefit. However, we do
not do anything with that information: we do not signpost people who have gone through the system and been identified as having a mental health condition to the traditional support offered by the NHS, local charities, support groups and so on. I am not looking to get people off PIP.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sorry that I came in late and missed the earlier part of the hon. Gentleman’s speech. To be quite frank with him, it is not so easy for people with mental health disabilities to get benefits. I now have a number of cases of people with mental health and other disabilities who have had their benefits stopped without any notice and without a by-your-leave.

Justin Tomlinson: The overall picture is that about 20% of those with a mental health condition accessed the highest rate of benefit under DLA, but the figure is now in the region of 80% under PIP. The system is better, although there is still work to be done. We have fantastic organisations, such as Mind, that regularly engage with Ministers and provide proactive suggestions about how to make further improvements.

My point is that when we identify such people, we should then signpost them to the additional support that is available. Through our own casework, we know that people who have experienced a mental health condition often do not know where to turn. There is no guidebook to tell them where to go. If we identify somebody with a mental health condition, we have a duty to do our very best to work with organisations such as Mind to signpost them to the help available, so that they can once again share the same opportunities that all of us take for granted.

This is an important debate. It is right that we are increasing spending on the most vulnerable people in society. We are rightly helping to give people an opportunity to get into work. The statistics are showing that real people are benefiting from our strong economic growth. I urge the Government to keep pressing forward with the positive action we are taking.

7.55 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). He has been a loyal supporter of the Government from the Back Benches during the past few months, and it sounds very much as though he is putting in a job application to the Prime Minister as a means to reduce welfare spending, it continues to be inflexible and unworkable. When we look at the motion and words of the Minister from the Dispatch Box, we see a mea culpa. The Government are admitting that the cap has in effect gone for the next four years. The Minister will not have to continue to come back to the Dispatch Box to say that it is not working, because we have now given them a blank cheque for the next three or four years, which I guess we should welcome.

We should really be talking about the fundamentals of the economic circumstances that got us into this situation in the first place. We need not the soundbites we used to hear about the long-term economic plan, but a real plan to make sure that we are boosting investment in productivity in this country. The challenge in delivering that has just got a little bit harder as a consequence of Brexit, which I suspect is really why we are having this debate today. It was always going to be about circumstances, and Brexit—the fall in the value of the pound, the declining confidence in future growth—has had the impact of bringing the Government to the Dispatch Box with the display we have seen this evening.

On social security, the Chancellor missed his opportunity to be the reformer he claims to be for “just about managing” families. He should instead have focused on addressing the underlying root causes of poverty by working to address unemployment and employment support. We acknowledge that the Government have now had to abandon their own targets on the welfare cap, and the projected increases in resources are welcome, after they had used the cap for so long as a source for cuts.

The welfare cap is a reprehensible and regressive measure that places the burden of the UK Government’s failed economic strategy on the shoulders of the most disadvantaged in society. We should remind ourselves that the welfare cap was a flagship policy for the Government in the last Parliament, but it ended up as a tool to find more cuts that the Treasury has used and abused to squeeze resources from the Department for Work and Pensions.

The new Chancellor will again have to breach the target set for him, but we ask him to acknowledge that the sheer fact this Government cannot even stick to their own targets proves that the inflexibility of the welfare cap makes it unworkable. The fact that they will breach the cap again and again illustrates a desire not to provide guidance about forgoing the cap for the next four years, but to abandon for good the policy of having a cap. An arbitrary cap in these times of uncertainty is neither useful nor adequate, as the Government’s previous breaches have shown.

The best way to reduce and manage welfare spending is to restore the economy to a healthy state, not to hit the most disadvantaged with the bill. The cap will not address the underlying structural problems that are keeping people reliant on social security, including low pay and wider labour market inequality. The fact that people in well-paid jobs cannot afford to pay rent, because of high housing costs, should at least provoke the Government to listen to the point that reliance on welfare is more than what they perceive as a culture of dependency. We keep coming back to the issue of housing and housing costs, but the only way to address that is to make sure we address the issue of supply in the housing market, which the Government have singularly failed to do.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said of the welfare cap target:

“The Conservative government already has the unimpressive record of meeting nought-out-of three of its fiscal targets.”

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation said in March 2014:

“The government’s newly-announced welfare cap will disproportionately target benefits claimed by the least well off”.

The IFS green budget, from February 2016, said that “in practice, the welfare cap has proved much less binding. Spending is already forecast to exceed the cap that was set in July 2015 for each of the next three fiscal years. In other words,
even though the welfare cap has only been in operation for less than two years (since the March 2014 Budget), it has already been
broken by the Chancellor. It is therefore not clear whether it
remains a real constraint on the government’s actions.”

The IFS was right then and is right today. What is the
point of the welfare cap as a principle if it is breached
time and again? It is, in effect, no constraint on what the
Government are doing, or at least on what they should
do be doing. It is unworkable and meaningless. It was
simply a sop to show that the Government were talking
tough, and pays no regard to changing circumstances. It
is intellectually, morally and ethically daft.

The £1 billion allocation to benefits in the autumn
statement is a drop in the ocean, with billions of savings
still to come from cuts to social security benefits over
the next few years. Changing the taper rates will not, on
its own, mitigate the impact of those cuts on low-income
families. Instead, the Government should reverse cuts to
the work allowance in full, so that working parents in
low-paid jobs—people whom we, as a House, should
want to support—do not lose out. Changing that taper
rate—the rate at which support is withdrawn from
low-income working households under universal credit—
will be less effective at targeting support towards low
earners with children than simply reversing the cuts to
the work allowance would be.

The Scottish National party has consistently argued
against the reductions in the work allowance and helped
to force a Tory U-turn on tax credit cuts last year.
Although the UK Government kicked the cut to the
work allowance down the line, it will come back to bite
next April, hitting “just about managing” families on
low and middle incomes. The maximum gain from the
2% reduction in the taper is only around £500, which
will fall short of what low and middle-income families
need to manage when the maximum losses from the
work allowance cuts are around £2,800. That is the
reality of what is happening under this Government.

Torsten Bell, director of the Resolution Foundation,
had said:

“When it comes to boosting ‘just managing’ family budgets, all
roads lead to universal credit. The most effective way to support
families would be by reversing the £3bn cut to work allowances
announced by the last chancellor”.

He added that a modest reduction in the taper rate

“leave a bittersweet taste among just about managing families.”

Analysis by the Institute for Public Policy Research
suggested the partial U-turn would cost £700 million a
year by 2020-21, compared with the £3 billion a year
taken out of work allowances previously announced.
Now that the welfare cap has gone, why do the Government
not reassess these challenges, and make sure that
they support the families that so desperately need that
support?

With losses for families on universal credit, the repugnant
rape clause—let us not forget that—and cuts for the
sick and the disabled still to come down the line, it is
clear the Tories have not abandoned their obsession with austerity. For all their rhetoric on the JAMs, they
are still unwilling to deliver. Although it is welcome that
there are to be no more welfare spending cuts, the sheer
fact that the Tories are ploughing ahead with the pre-
planned cuts next year, hitting low and middle-income
families, shows that there are real-time cuts for families
across the UK in this Parliament.

In a report to the Scottish Parliament’s Social Security
Committee, researchers from Sheffield Hallam University
showed that by 2020-21 Scotland can expect to lose just
over £1 billion a year as a result of the latest welfare
reforms introduced by the UK Government. That is
£1 billion of cuts that have yet to hit ordinary working
people in Scotland, delivered by this Westminster
Government—happy Christmas. Sheffield Hallam
University also estimates that the pre-2015 reforms are
already costing claimants in Scotland just over £1.1 billion
a year. That brings the cumulative loss expected from all
the post-2010 welfare reforms up to more than £2 billion
a year. We will not grow the economy by taking cash
out of the pockets of the poorest. We will fix the
economy, the debt and the deficit by putting in place
measures that will grow the economy. This obsession
with punishing the poor must stop.

The UK Government are saving a whopping £30 million
in 2017-18, rising to £450 million in 2020-21, from the
cuts to the employment and support allowance work-related
activity group and the component in universal credit,
according to figures published by the Treasury in the
summer Budget 2015 and updated in March 2016.
Already we have seen Tory Back Benchers rise again
and again to vote with us on the Opposition Benches
against those regressive policies. Even if the Government
will not listen to those of us on the Opposition Benches,
it is high time they listened to their own Members.
Analysis by the Institute for Public Policy Research
suggested the partial U-turn on the universal credit
taper rate would cost £700 million. Why will the
Government not do the right thing by the people affected?

Any move to increase the national living wage, as the
Government call it, is to be welcomed, but the UK
Government are still dragging their feet; they lack the
ambition to really tackle low pay. The UK Government’s
national living wage is not a living wage; it is simply a
further tier of the national minimum wage. The real
living wage is calculated according to the basic cost of
living and therefore takes account of the adequacy of
household incomes for achieving an acceptable minimum
living standard.

Why will the Government not accept that definition
and recognise that that should be the bare minimum for
those who are working hard in our society? The UK
Government’s decision to set an arbitrary rate for their
national living wage fundamentally challenges the value
of having an organisation providing independent advice
on wage levels across the UK. I therefore ask the
Minister: will the Government start to accept that
impartially provided advice?

The Scottish National party supports the payment
and promotion of the real living wage and, in Scotland,
continues to set the bar on fair work. Leading the way,
on Monday 31 October, the First Minister welcomed
the new living wage rate of £8.45 per hour, which will
benefit thousands of staff in Scotland, and urged more
Scottish organisations to sign up as accredited living
wage employers. That rise of 20p will benefit thousands
of employees at living wage accredited organisations in
Scotland.
The best way to reduce and manage welfare spending is to restore the economy to a healthy state, not to hit the most disadvantaged with the bill. Austerity is a choice, not a necessity—an obsession that has been proved, time and again, to fail. It is time for an economic strategy that focuses on inclusive and fair growth. The SNP is delivering for Scotland; Westminster is delivering ongoing austerity. We are all paying the price for that.

**Question put and agreed to.**

Resolved.

That pursuant to the Charter for Budget Responsibility: Autumn 2015 update, which was approved by this House on 14 October 2015, under Section 1 of the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011, this House agrees that the breach of the Welfare Cap in 2019-20 and 2020-21, due to higher forecast inflation and spend on disability benefits, is justified and that no further debate will be required in relation to this specific breach.

**Business without Debate**

**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, I will put motions 3 to 6 together.

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

**ACQUISITION OF LAND**

That the draft Housing and Planning Act 2016 (Compulsory Purchase) (Corresponding Amendments) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 7 November, be approved.

**BANK LEVY**

That the draft Bank Levy (Double Taxation Relief) (Single Resolution Fund Levy) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 16 November, be approved.

**COMPANIES**

That the draft Companies, Partnerships and Groups (Accounts and Non-Financial Reporting) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 7 November, be approved.

**SPEAKER’S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY AUTHORITY**

That, in pursuance of paragraph 2A of Schedule 3 of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, Mr Shrinivas Honap be appointed as a lay member of the Speaker’s Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years from 27 January 2017 to 26 January 2022.—(Guy Opperman.)

**Question agreed to.**

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

**EDUCATION**

That the draft Coasting Schools (England) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 20 October, be approved.—(Guy Opperman.)

The House divided: Ayes 252, Noes 103.
EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(1)).

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Ordered,
That Julian Knight be a member of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

Tellers for the Ayes:
Andrew Griffiths and Mark Spencer

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Nic Dakin

Question accordingly agreed to.

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK 2014-2020:
MID-TERM REVIEW AND REVISION


Question agreed to.

PETITION

A509 Development Ashton Grove

8.23 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): This is a grassroots petition, showing that in this day of multimedia it is still possible to campaign at a local level. This petition has been organised by Ken Chapman, Dennis Randall and Julia Murphy. It is about an alteration to a road, which I am sure the highways authority thinks is a very good idea, but it dramatically affects the people of Ashton Grove. The petition was signed by virtually everyone in the area, because people are very concerned about the effect that this alteration to the road will have on their neighbourhood.

The petition states:
The Humble Petition of Ashton Grove, Northamptonshire and the surrounding area,
Sheweth,
That the petitioners believe that the development of the A509 as currently proposed should not go ahead due to reduction in safety, the increase to noise and air pollution, and the privacy concerns that raising the road and removing the trees would cause to residents of Ashton Grove.
Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Department for Transport to encourage Northamptonshire County Council to reassess their plans for the A509 and amend them in consultation with local residents.
And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[P001992]
EU Data Protection Rules

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

8.24 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I am grateful for tonight’s opportunity to consider the implementation of the European Union data protection rules, and I look forward to a robust and constructive response from the Minister.

Let me start by stating the obvious: the way we send, receive, collect, analyse and use data has been transformed in the last few decades, and that transformation is only going to become more marked as time goes on. It is truly amazing that around 90% of global data that exists today was created in just the last two years, and that amount is predicted to grow year on year for the next decade. I was staggered to learn recently that Transport for London record 4.5 million pieces of information about bus movements every single day—a very far cry from the old days of clipboards and manual counters.

Of course, significant opportunities are presented by the growth of big data, a term which refers to the growth of large, complex data that can be analysed to provide valuable new insights and personalised services. Yet as our lives become increasingly digitised, the growth of big data, a term which refers to the counters.

The growth of big data has equally big implications for privacy and consumer protection and enhance trust and confidence in how personal data is used and managed, giving citizens more control over their own private information. It will replace existing legislation that has been in place since the mid-1990s, which in the UK means superseding the Data Protection Act.

The new regulation entered into force on 24 May 2016. As a regulation, it will directly apply to all European Union member states from 25 May 2018; there will be no need for new national legislation. The new data protection directive also entered into force in May, with EU member states required to transpose it into their national law by May 2018. European Commissioners called the GDPR an “essential step to strengthen citizens’ fundamental rights in the digital age and facilitate business by simplifying rules for companies in the Digital Single Market…The Directive for the police and criminal justice sector protects citizens’ fundamental right to data protection whenever personal data is used by criminal law enforcement authorities” and will especially protect the personal data of victims, witnesses and suspects of crime.

Data protection is ultimately underpinned by the European Union’s charter of fundamental rights. The right to the protection of personal data is explicitly recognised by article 8, which guarantees the right to respect for private and family life, home and correspondence.

Data protection is a highly developed area of European Union law—indeed, some describe the free movement of data as a fifth freedom. Given all that, what could Brexit mean for data protection in the United Kingdom?

It is encouraging that the Government have confirmed that the GDPR will still apply to the UK from May 2018. Ministers have stated this on a number of occasions, and I am confident that the Minister for Digital and Culture will do so again today. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has said:

“We will be members of the EU in 2018 and therefore it would be expected and quite normal for us to opt into the GDPR and then look later at how best we might be able to help British business with data protection while maintaining high levels of protection for members of the public.”

The Minister for Digital and Culture has said:

“the Data Protection Act 1998…provides for very strong safeguards that are set to get stronger. The Government have said that we will opt in to the forthcoming general data protection regulation, which includes stronger enforcement measures than the current Data Protection Act.”—[Official Report, 28 November 2016, Vol. 617, c. 1277.]

It is clear that the Government plan that the GDPR will apply in the UK from May 2018, presumably because, as the Secretary of State said, in 2018 the UK will still be a member of the EU. But what about after we leave?

Very little has been said about what data protection law in the UK will look like after that point. In fact, the Minister for Digital and Culture has said that there may be “changes to data protection regulatory landscape after the UK exits the European Union.”—[Official Report, 7 November 2016, Vol. 616, c. 36WS.]

That point is particularly significant because the GDPR will apply directly, without needing to be transposed into national legislation, so when the UK leaves the EU our main data protection law will still be the Data Protection Act 1998, which is now not fit for purpose.

The Digital Economy Bill and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 were introduced with little mention of how they would adhere to the GDPR. Unless the GDPR is
transposed into national legislation, our country’s main
data protection law post-Brexit will be the outdated
Data Protection Act. This matters, because without the
new protections, UK citizens are vulnerable. Government
research shows that nine out of 10 organisations have
suffered data breaches, but the vast majority are under
no obligation to report incidents. Falling back on the old
system will not be good enough; we need to be moving
forward into the 21st century in data protection,
not backward into the last century. A further very real
question mark hangs over the future implementation of
the GDPR because of the Digital Economy Bill. Big
Brother Watch has suggested that part 5 of that Bill fails
to show how the legislation will adhere to the GDPR—
indeed, the Bill refers to adhering to the Data Protection
Act 1998 and the Regulation of Investigatory Powers
Act 2000, but both pieces of legislation are now out of
date.

The Information Commissioner pointed out that when
the GDPR takes effect in the UK,
“the government will have to introduce national level derogations
as part of implementation”,
so there will have to be
“a thorough consideration of the impact of the new legal framework
on all aspects of the Bill affecting data sharing”.
The Open Rights group says that the GDPR
“should be looked in more detail”
adding that:

“Since the vote to leave the European Union we simply do not
know what data protection regime will be in place when the
Digital Economy Bill becomes law, and we fail to see how in this
context Parliament can satisfy itself that the Bill will balance the
needs of government with the privacy of citizens.”

It certainly seems illogical that this Bill should have
been introduced with no reference to the GDPR when it
will have to adhere to the GDPR in less than two years.

It is vital that the UK maintains data protection rules
in line with EU rules after Brexit if we want to remain a
major player on the digital stage. Many businesses and
services operate across borders, and international data
flows are essential to UK business operations across
multiple sectors. In fact, half of all global trade in
services already depends on access to cross-border data
flows. There is a risk that after Brexit the UK may be
treated as a “third country” on data protection issues.
That is because the recently adopted Investigatory Powers
Act is currently a UK competence, but that will not be
the case once we are out of the EU. In a perhaps
exquisite irony, we would find our legislation being
judged against the standards of the GDPR. We would
be a third country and could be required to come to
what is termed an “adequacy decision” with the EU to
allow data to flow freely between the United Kingdom
and EU member states and to enable trade with the
single market on equal terms.

In order to adopt an adequacy decision, the European
Commission must be satisfied that a third country
offers an equivalent level of data protection. A number
of commentators fear that the recent Investigatory Powers
Act means that the Commission may take some convincing.
The risk is that such negotiations could take years to
resolve, leaving protections for UK citizens in the meantime
weak, as well as hugely disadvantaging the crucial tech
sector, one of our great success stories. How easy it
would be for our competitors in mainland Europe then
to say to people, “Move here, where you can be inside
the system. Don’t stay outside in the cold.”

Ministers should be working to ensure that our data
protection rules are strong enough to secure an EU-UK
adequacy decision, which will be vital to underpin trade
rights across the digital economy. That is what we need,
but as with the rest of the Brexit negotiations, we are in
the dark, unless the Minister can shed some light this
evening. Will he tonight confirm that the Government
will prioritise guaranteeing international data flows post-
Brexit during negotiations?

The Information Commissioner has also stated that,
with so many businesses and services operating across
borders,
“international consistency around data protection laws and rights
is crucial both to businesses and organisations and to consumers and
citizens.”

Will the Minister also confirm that the Government are
seeking to secure an EU-UK adequacy decision? It is
worth noting in passing that the last adequacy decision,
with New Zealand, took more than three years to
negotiate.

Data are the currency of the digital economy and we
must not shy away from the broader challenges and
opportunities this presents. The data landscape is shifting
and legislation must keep pace if we want to protect
citizens’ rights while simultaneously tapping into the
potential offered by the internet of things. If we want
the UK to remain at the forefront of the digital revolution,
our data protection legislation must remain at least
equivalent to European Union rules. As the Information
Commissioner has succinctly said:

“I don’t think Brexit should mean Brexit when it comes to
standards of data protection.”
The danger is that, to paraphrase, when it comes to
data, Brexit could mean exit for tech.

The Government should champion the GDPR as a
starting point for a comprehensive examination of how
we can make better policy on big data. I hope the
Minister will tonight provide further reassurance that
the Government recognise the strategic and economic
value of data for our country, as well as the importance
of facilitating public confidence in how data are being
used, and are consequently putting data, and data
protection, at the heart of their negotiations.

8.37 pm
The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock):
It normally says at the start of a Minister’s speech in
response to an Adjournment debate, “Let me start by
thanking the hon. Member for securing this important
debate,” and this time I really mean it, because this is an
important subject. Although the hon. Member for
Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and I sit on opposite
sides of the House, we have a similar interest in the
subject and want to go in a similar direction in terms of
the data protection regime that applies in the UK. We
also share a common understanding of the value of
data in a digital economy.

That does not surprise me, because the hon. Gentleman
is not only an expert in his own right, but as MP for
Cambridge he represents one of the most data-rich
constituencies in the country. It is very good to see
continuing investment in tech companies in Cambridge,
including after 23 June. In fact, one of the biggest foreign investments in any British company ever was the investment in ARM Holdings based in Cambridge in July this year. That was a vote of confidence in British tech post-referendum, and since then we have seen investment decisions intrinsically based on the strength of our data systems, by companies such as Google, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, IBM and others, all of whom have made significant investment decisions into the UK post-Brexit. We have been clear that the general data protection regulation will apply in the UK from May 2018. We fully expect still to be in the EU at that point. That is why we have announced that we will ensure that the GDPR will apply in the UK from then.

The information rights landscape has evolved rapidly in the past decade, as the hon. Gentleman set out. The ability to collect, share and process data is critical to success in today’s digital global society. It is right to update our data protection regime not only because we will still be in the EU, but because it is time to update it, given the enormous changes that have taken place.

We were clear in the negotiations on the GDPR that any new data protection legislation needs to meet the need for high standards of protection for individuals’ personal data while not placing disproportionate burdens on businesses and organisations. The UK was successful in negotiating a more risk-based approach to the GDPR, allowing for greater flexibility in relation to the regulation’s mandatory requirements, such as on data protection impact assessments and data protection officers. We want a scheme that works effectively, protects data and is flexible to ensure that our data economy thrives. Therefore, we were successful in negotiating a reduction in some of the red tape and bureaucracy for ordinary businesses whose primary activities are not data processing but who have data that need to be protected. We succeeded in the negotiations to give greater discretion to the UK’s Information Commissioner in the way it enforces breaches of the regulation.

The new rules will strengthen rights and empower individuals to have more control over their personal data, for example, by providing individuals with greater access to their personal data and information on how their data are being used, and a new right to data portability, making it easier to transfer personal data between service providers. In addition, the GDPR provides important new safeguards, including new fines of up to 4% of an organisation’s annual global turnover, or €20 million, in the most serious cases of breaches of the regulation. Therefore, this is an important call to action for businesses to offer individuals assurances that their data are protected.

The hon. Gentleman asked a series of questions about the implementation of the GDPR. We now need to press ahead with implementation. It will become directly applicable in UK law on 25 May 2018, but a lot of preparatory work needs to be done in the meantime, both in government and by businesses throughout the country. We are now working on the overall approach and the details of that implementation. Details of any new legislation in this area will be made in due course and announced in the normal way, but I can tell him that we are considering these matters in great detail as we speak.

It is important for businesses and organisations to prepare now for the new standards of data processing. A lot of work has already taken place, but there is much for businesses to do to ensure that their processes and practices are aligned with the GDPR. The Information Commissioner is providing regular updates on the steps that organisations and individuals should take to prepare for the new legal framework and will continue to provide guidance over the next few months. We plan to consult with stakeholders on key measures where we have the opportunity to apply flexibilities, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, in the regulation to maximise and to protect our domestic interests and to get the balance right between delivering the protection that people need and ensuring that the regulation operates in a way that ensures that the UK’s data economy can be highly successful. For example, one measure will be on what the age of consent should be for children who wish to access information services. We want a data protection framework that works best for the UK and meets our needs. Those consultations will be forthcoming.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the issue of adequacy and the need for our data protection regime to be interoperable with data regimes around the world. It is a question of our data relationship not only with the European Union, but with other countries, too, because the data economy is truly global. We have made progress in our argument within the EU that data localisation rules are not appropriate. That is a live issue in the EU at the moment. There is also work to be done between now and 2018 to make sure that we achieve a coherent data protection regime and that data flows with the EU are not interrupted after we leave. The Government are considering all options for the most beneficial way of ensuring that the UK’s data protection regime continues to build a culture of data confidence and trust that safeguards citizens and supports businesses in a global data economy.

Without having been able to prejudge the publication of consultations and of legislative plans, I hope that I can reassure the hon. Gentleman and the tech industry in the UK that we are doing all we can to ensure that our future data standards are of the very highest quality, including their international links, and that we get the balance right between ensuring the high levels of protection that individuals and companies need and ought to expect with the appropriate levels of flexibility to make sure that our data economy can be one of the strongest in the world.

Daniel Zeichner: The Minister is making a deft response and I am listening closely to him. Could he say more about the impact of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, which has been raised, and the difficulty that it might present to achieving an adequacy agreement?

Matt Hancock: I was about to come on to that issue, which was raised in the Digital Economy Bill Committee. The Bill includes important data-sharing arrangements, supported by the Labour Government in Wales, to improve public services and other things by ensuring that data are appropriately shared. Those sharing arrangements will still be protected by the data protection regime. The Bill is drafted according to the current law, which is the Data Protection Act. It is not possible to draft legislation in anticipation of future legislation; that is not how the body of legislation works. If and
when legislation is proposed to amend an existing system such as the Data Protection Act, one would expect it to include an amendment to the Digital Economy Bill, should this Parliament enact it, in order to make it consistent. That is how legislation is made in the UK. It is neither possible nor logically sensible to legislate in anticipation of future legislation, even if we fully expect it to come into force. All of the existing statute and the Digital Economy Bill, which is currently before the other place, are drafted with reference to the existing regime because the Bill will come into force before the expected future regime comes into existence in 2018.

That explanation may have been more convoluted than it needed to be, but I hope it shows why the Bill—and, indeed, other recent legislation—is drafted in that way. I have heard the complaints, but they simply miss the point of how legislation is made and framed. I hope that that answers the hon. Gentleman’s question and that he is reassured that we are working to implement a modern and effective data protection framework, fit for purpose for the digital age. I welcome his input.

*Question put and agreed to.*

8.49 pm

*House adjourned.*
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): My hon. Friend will know that I am closely involved with the construction products sector, and the construction industry in general, through the Construction Leadership Council. It would be premature to comment on any deal to be struck, but he can take it from me that it has my closest attention, as does the future of the construction industry itself.

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will know, I am closely involved with the construction products sector, and the construction industry in general, through the Construction Leadership Council. It would be premature to comment on any deal to be struck, but he can take it from me that it has my closest attention, as does the future of the construction industry itself.

Jesse Norman: As I have said, it is premature to give any kind of assurance. What is striking, though, is the amount of new investment that has been taking place in this country, irrespective, one might think, of any concerns about Brexit. That includes investments in BAE Systems, Nissan, Jaguar Land Rover, Honda, Associated British Ports and many other large industrial players.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Will my hon. Friend explore how World Trade Organisation-compliant tariff drawback mechanisms and inward processing measures can ensure that the objectives of my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) are met?

Jesse Norman: That is a formidably technically sophisticated question, for which I thank my hon. Friend. I think that it probably lies to be answered between ourselves and the Department for International Trade. We will certainly consider it carefully.

Mr Speaker: There are some very clever people in Wycombe, you know.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Food production and food processing is an important part of the north-west economy that is not necessarily susceptible to export beyond the European Union because of different consumer tastes and preferences in the rest of the world. What negotiations are the Government considering or already undertaking to protect this important industry?

Jesse Norman: That question is really as much for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as it is for us. Nevertheless, it is true that tastes are expanding around the world, and therefore one sees every opportunity for British food producers to expand their world markets in the days to come.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Given that we have a massive trade deficit with the European Union, surely it would be economic suicide for the EU not to agree a free trade deal with us. However, Civitas has calculated that if it did go down that line, British business would have to pay about £5 billion a year in tariffs under WTO rules to access the EU market, and EU businesses would have to pay about £13 billion in tariffs to access the UK market. Given that, could we not agree to cover all tariffs for British businesses exporting to the EU, so that they do not have to pay anything, and still be quids in?

Jesse Norman: Alas, long experience has taught me to distrust some of these speculative estimates of cost and benefit, so I will not comment on that.
Jesse Norman: I assure the hon. Gentleman that that question is being taken extremely seriously in my Department. Northern Ireland is an area for which I have a ministerial responsibility. I have met, on several occasions, Northern Ireland Economy Ministers and senior figures in industry there. We will continue to look at this question very closely.

Science and Innovation

2. Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote science and innovation. [907817]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): This Government are strongly committed to science and innovation. We protected the science budget at the spending review in 2015. In the last autumn statement, a few days ago, we committed to spending a further £2 billion a year by the end of this Parliament. The creation of UK Research and Innovation, through the passage of the Higher Education and Research Bill, will increase the value and impact of our investments in science and innovation in the years ahead. ¹

Adam Afriyie: Thank you for the Minister for that answer. It has certainly been a good time for science and innovation in Britain. It has also been a good year for the UK space sector, with Major Tim Peake’s historic visit to the international space station and a new spaceport here in the UK. It certainly strikes me that the next big challenge will be the successful delivery of the ExoMars programme, particularly given some of the rumours that have been going around. Will the Minister update the House on any progress made at the European Space Agency summit recently?

Joseph Johnson: Yes, I am happy to provide a brief update. My hon. Friend is an aficionado of space policy and former chair of the parliamentary space committee, so he will be delighted to know that we had an excellent outcome at the European Space Agency’s Council of Ministers. We committed a further £1.44 billion, which has secured the future of the ExoMars programme, among many other things.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not want to ruin the Minister’s Christmas celebrations, which are imminent, but if he looks at the deplorable investment in research and development—the figures that came out only this week—does he not see that he needs to wake up and smell the coffee? The fact of the matter is that research and innovation will be deeply damaged by leaving the European Union. He should ask the universities what they think.

Joseph Johnson: I know that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the Government’s commitment to research and development, which was underscored in the autumn statement with a further £2 billion by the end of this Parliament—perhaps the biggest single increase in R and D expenditure by any Government in the memory of anyone in this Parliament.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Innovate UK plays a key role in promoting science and technology by giving grants to entrepreneurs. Will the Minister continue to support it as new fourth industrial revolution businesses come forward to seek new funding to develop the next generation of science and technology businesses?

Joseph Johnson: Yes, I am happy to provide that assurance. Innovate UK, our innovation agency, will be at the heart of our industrial strategy, and the autumn statement will provide it with the resources it needs to continue to do its job of supporting small businesses in innovation.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Tidal Lagoon Power’s report, “Ours to own”, anticipates that tidal lagoons could bring more than £70 billion to the UK industry. Swansea Bay tidal lagoon is key to unlocking that innovative potential, which has great opportunities for Cardiff and the north Wales coast, as well. I appreciate that the Minister will have concerns about costs to customers, but will he commit to weighing up all aspects of the energy trilemma in his response to the Hendry report?

Joseph Johnson: We are looking very carefully at the report and will be coming forward with our response in due course.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): Chemical and pharmaceutical businesses are an important feature of the northern powerhouse and emerging enterprises in the sector are often rooted in university research labs. What support and funding can the UK Government commit to encourage continued research collaboration across Europe—and indeed the rest of the world—to increase our innovative business base post-Brexit?

Joseph Johnson: We support international collaboration in science and research in Europe, and indeed around the world, and will continue to do so.

20. [907838] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Government talk about promoting science and innovation, but this Government pulled the plug on funding for carbon capture and storage. How much of the additional £4.7 billion R and D money announced in the autumn statement will be allocated for carbon capture and storage?

Joseph Johnson: We will consult the sector and the science community very carefully as part of our development of the industrial strategy, in a discussion paper that we will launch in the weeks to come.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Catalyst science discovery centre in my constituency does an excellent job of promoting careers in science and engineering for young people. Will the Minister come and visit it? It struggles to keep going financially, but it does an absolutely unbelievably good job.

Joseph Johnson: I commend the good work going on in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and look forward to an opportunity to visit that centre as and when it arises.

¹ [Official Report, 16 December 2016, Vol. 618, c. 7-8MC.]
Industrial Strategy


6. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What his priorities are for the development of the Government’s industrial strategy. [907821]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Our industrial strategy will help to build an economy that works for everyone. To do that, we will look to drive productivity and growth in all parts of the country. We have already set out steps to deliver this, including, as my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation just said, significant funding announcements for science, research and development and infrastructure in the autumn statement.

Neil Gray: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, and I note that he said that the industrial strategy should work for everybody. The Office for Budget Responsibility projects that there will be an additional 500,000 new jobs by 2020, but even if all those jobs were taken up by disabled people, the disability employment gap would still not be halved. Can the Secretary of State explain how the industrial strategy will support achieving the Government’s commitment to halve the disability employment gap by 2020?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. It is important that we close that gap, and the Government have made a firm commitment to doing so. He will see when we make our proposals—I hope that he will contribute to them—that part of our purpose is to ensure that people who may have been excluded from the labour market have the skills to enable them to prosper in the future.

Dr Whitford: Ayrshire is a beautiful coastal county with areas of both rural and urban deprivation, but with huge potential in the aerospace and pharmaceutical industries. The Scottish Government are supportive of a growth deal to invest in infrastructure and key sectors. Will the Minister meet me to hear the proposal to unlock Ayrshire’s industrial potential?

Greg Clark: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady. I am proud of the city deals and the growth deals that we have negotiated, including in Glasgow, which is not far away from Ayrshire in the west of Scotland. Ayrshire has a huge amount to offer, and Prestwick is an important asset. I welcome the initiative of the councils in Ayrshire.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): May I urge my right hon. Friend to consider creating free ports across the nation? Such free trade zones around our great port cities can simultaneously boost manufacturing, promote regional growth and grow exports—surely, all key ingredients in a successful industrial strategy.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. For his industry. He has published an excellent report for the Centre for Policy Studies, which makes for very good reading. He knows that I am considering it with my colleagues, and I commend him for writing it and putting it forward.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): As my right hon. Friend develops his industrial strategy, may I give him some friendly advice? Drop the word “industrial” and drop the word “strategy”, and replace them with the words, “competition, innovation and skills policy”.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. He will see that one of the differences between our approach to industrial strategy and policy—it is important to note that industry, for this purpose, means the services sector as well as manufacturing—and previous approaches is that our approach will not be about simply addressing the needs of incumbents; we want to make Britain the best, the most competitive and the most contestable place for business to locate. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend contributed to it. I think that he will find that it is music to his ears.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): Surely, one of the Secretary of State’s priorities should be the steel industry. Is he aware that Noel Village foundry in Doncaster is being badly affected by reductions in the steel industry supply chain? Will he ask his Department to give urgent advice to the company to see whether anything can be done to prevent it from going into administration, even at this late stage?

Greg Clark: I am happy to meet the right hon. Lady about this, but I can give her some news on steel that I think she will welcome. I can announce today that the Government are going to publish their demand for 3 million tonnes. We are updating the procurement guidelines for steel to include the health service and local authorities and to drop the previous threshold of £10 million for which those guidelines apply. That will be good for the steel industry generally and for all firms within it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Small-scale manufacturing in firms that often have fewer than half a dozen people is key to the local economy in Kettering and is responsible for a lot of the employment opportunities. Will the Secretary of State make sure that small-scale manufacturers are a key priority in his industrial strategy?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. I would commend two things to my hon. Friend. First, we want to make sure that small manufacturers can access the extra funding for research and innovation that my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation has described. Secondly, we want to address the ability of small and growing firms to obtain the finance to allow them to grow to the next stage, which is very important in having a vigorous competitive market, as my hon. Friend suggests.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): From education to research and development, Scotland’s universities play a key role in boosting our economy across all regions and sectors. With that in mind, will the Secretary of State outline what the role of universities...
will be in his forthcoming industrial strategy? Will the recently announced new money for R and D be available to Scottish universities?

**Greg Clark:** Yes, universities are very important. We have had a number of very constructive sessions with university leaders and researchers. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that science does not recognise boundaries. Universities and researchers in Scotland have a fantastic record of success. In fact, with 8.5% of the UK population, Scotland attracts 10% of UK research funding, which shows that it can prosper and thrive with the new changes we are making on funding.

**Callum McCaig:** Science does not recognise boundaries. Universities Scotland estimates that 10% of research funding comes from the EU and that up to 16% to 20% of staff come from EU nations. With that in mind, will the Secretary of State ensure that, as we exit the EU, Scotland’s universities are not hit punitively by immigration sanctions and the withdrawal of EU funding?

**Greg Clark:** It follows from what I have just said—science does not respect boundaries—that the science community is very global and international. Of course, as the hon. Gentleman would expect, we will in the negotiations reflect the importance of that not just for Scotland, but for the whole United Kingdom.

**Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab):** The Secretary of State talks about an industrial strategy and those words are in his title, but so far he has shared only bland generalities. Despite the high-profile examples cited, the Institute of Chartered Accountants predicts that business investment will fall by 2.4% in 2017. There are great opportunities for British businesses post-Brexit, but they need leadership, and this climate of uncertainty is toxic to investment. Will the Secretary of State stop playing Scrooge with his assurances, and give British business the Christmas present it wants—an industrial strategy?

**Greg Clark:** A bit of optimism on the part of the hon. Lady would not go amiss, especially in this Christmas season. In fact, there is huge enthusiasm in businesses right across the country and huge engagement with us in developing our long-term policies. Perhaps she has been distracted by some of the events in her party in recent months, so let me summarise the things we have done since July. We have given the go-ahead—she may have missed this—for some very important strategic infrastructure projects: Hinkley Point C, the third runway at Heathrow and the next phase of HS2. We have secured investment in Nissan, close to her constituency, as we announced a month ago. We have ratified the Paris agreement, and we have secured the extra investment that my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation talked about. We have done more to put our industrial future on the right footing in five months than the previous Government did in 13 years.

**Business Numbers**

4. **Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** What assessment his Department has made of trends in the number of businesses in the UK.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman):** To turn from Marley’s ghost stalking the Labour Front Bench, the number of businesses in the UK continues to grow: at the start of 2016, there were a record 5.5 million private sector businesses, which is an increase of 97,000 since 2015 and 1 million more than in 2010.

**Bob Blackman:** This weekend, small businesses in my constituency held a Christmas market in Belmont Circle to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Eye 2 Eye opticians, which is doing a brilliant job locally. What more can my hon. Friend do to ensure that small and medium-sized businesses prosper and grow in this country?

**Jesse Norman:** My hon. Friend is right to recognise the central importance of small and medium-sized businesses to our economy. The Government have been supporting that vital sector of our economy through: the extension of small business rate relief; our support for the British Business Bank, which has dealt with more than 51,000 small businesses; the new productivity council, which was announced in the autumn statement; and the new patient capital review.

**Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op):** Given the number of businesses, will the Minister ensure that there is a level playing field so that the level of subsidy for tariffs applied to the motor industry is applied equally across all exporters? Will he publish the total amount of subsidy before 31 March?

**Jesse Norman:** There has been no special deal for Nissan or any other part of the motor industry. Whatever arrangements are made to support different sectors of the UK economy are fully transparent. The general picture is that we are proceeding vigorously and with some care towards a rather attractive destination.

16. **Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con):** Superfast broadband is essential to many small businesses. Does the Minister agree that it is very disappointing that many villages in my constituency of South East Cambridgeshire do not have connectivity and face delay in getting it? Will he join me in encouraging and supporting further connectivity across the region?

**Jesse Norman:** My hon. and learned Friend is right. She will know that I have been a pretty tireless campaigner for superfast broadband, especially in relation to BT and Openreach. I agree with her about the importance of broadband. The autumn statement announced a £1 billion package for fibre and 5G connectivity, prioritising business connections across the UK. That follows the superfast broadband programme, which is due to deliver 91% coverage in South East Cambridgeshire by mid-2017 and a new universal service obligation.

**Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab):** Fifty thousand businesses die unnecessarily every year because of late payment. Some £31 billion is owed and small firms alone spend £10 billion chasing outstanding invoices. While the duty to report and the small business commissioner have been much delayed, just 378 of the largest 55,000 businesses have signed up to the prompt
payment code. When will the Conservative Government start doing something about the scourge of late payment? Put some teeth into it, so that small businesses can act.

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman is right to point the finger squarely at the issue of late payment. It is a serious matter that we will continue to press forward on, but one must see it in the context of the thriving small business economy that I have outlined.

Women on Boards

5. Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of women on boards.

Margot James: The Government committed in their manifesto to reducing the burden of regulation on business by £10 billion during this Parliament. We will also carefully consider the implications of leaving the European Union for the business impact target, and the opportunities to reduce further the burdens on businesses such as the excellent self-employed food producers in South East Cornwall.

Margot James: The mission of the Sussex-based organisation is to get more women on boards. I congratulate my hon. Friend on making a host of female entrepreneurs and almost half the users of the business support helpline are women. The Hampton-Alexander review is looking beyond boards at building female pipelines among senior management. We also support the Women’s Business Council.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Is there a regional pattern in low numbers of women on boards? Will the Minister outline what discussions have taken place with ministerial colleagues in the devolved Administrations about increasing the number of women on boards?

Margot James: I welcome the hon. Lady’s commitment to increasing the number of women on boards in Scotland. I will have discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland to ensure that the national target applies equally to Scotland as to elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Self-employed: Support

7. Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the self-employed.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I apologise to the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie)—I meant Northern Ireland, of course, in my earlier response. The gov.uk website and the business support helpline provide information on starting and running a business. Growth hubs also provide access to local and national support, and 4.8 million people are now self-employed.

Mrs Murray: In South East Cornwall we have some fantastic self-employed people who make a host of excellent food products. Does my hon. Friend agree that there will be opportunities for them to grow their businesses and be released from excessive red tape once we leave the European Union? What advice does she have for them?

Margot James: The Government committed in their manifesto to reducing the burden of regulation on business by £10 billion during this Parliament. We will also carefully consider the implications of leaving the European Union for the business impact target, and the opportunities to reduce further the burdens on businesses such as the excellent self-employed food producers in South East Cornwall.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): False self-employment is a particular issue in sectors such as retail, care and construction. The Gangmasters Licensing Authority is now expected to regulate those industries, which contain more than half a million businesses, yet has only 79 members of staff across the entire UK. Its director of labour market enforcement has not yet been appointed, despite the new powers being in place. Will the Government ensure that they act speedily on that?

Margot James: I assure the hon. Lady that we are acting swiftly to appoint the director of labour market enforcement. I agree with her that it is a crucial role.

EU-derived Employment Rights

8. Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that all EU-derived employment rights will be protected after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): The Prime Minister has made it clear that the Government will not, as a consequence of our withdrawal, allow any erosion of rights in the workplace, whether those rights derive from EU or UK law. She has further made it clear that the Government are determined to deliver an economy that works for everyone, and fundamental to that is the preservation of existing workers’ rights.

Mr Shuker: Is it not the fact that our EU-derived employment rights are upheld not by legislation but because they are enforced by the relevant European courts? Given that progress on a British Bill of Rights has been patchy at best, what will guarantee those rights after we leave?

Margot James: Such rights will be upheld by British courts after we leave the European Union. The UK enjoys record employment at the same time as employment rights that exceed what is required by EU law in the important areas of maternity leave, parental leave and statutory annual leave.
Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Given the sorry history of Brexit broken promises, does the Minister understand the widespread cynicism expressed about the idea that rights will be protected post-Brexit, including on a continuing basis? Does she agree with the Brexit promise-breaker par excellence, the Foreign Secretary, that these crucial rights are back-breaking?

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman prejudices the situation by saying that we have had a chance to break Brexit promises before we have even started the negotiations. The Prime Minister could not have been clearer—she has been supported in this at the Dispatch Box by the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union—that workers’ rights will be protected and possibly even enhanced.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): That is more a matter for my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman bears a striking resemblance to an exploding volcano. Let us hear the feller.

Mr Bone: As always, I am very reasoned, Mr Speaker, but really, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) was talking absolute rubbish just then, which is not unusual. Does the Minister agree with the democratic principle that the Government of the day will decide on employment rights? Is that not what we want—employment rights decided in this House, not in Europe?

Margot James: This House will decide on employment rights, but it is important to remind my hon. Friend that during the lifetime of this Government, the Prime Minister could not have been clearer that workers’ rights will be protected after Britain leaves the European Union.

Leaving the EU

9. Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What discussions has his Department had with business representatives on the Government’s plans for the UK to leave the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): We have held a wide range of discussions with businesses, their representatives, investors, workers and local leaders in all four home nations. We expect that to continue in the coming months to secure UK interests in any exit negotiations.

Emma Reynolds: There is concern among business about a potential cliff edge in March 2019 if we leave the EU and fall back on World Trade Organisation rules and tariffs. Does the Minister agree with the Chancellor, who yesterday told the Treasury Committee that there is “an emerging view among businesses…that having a longer period to manage the adjustment between where we are now as full members of the European Union and where we get to in the future as a result of the negotiations…would be generally helpful, would” help smooth the transition and would help to reduce disruption for business?

Jesse Norman: It is a tempting invitation to offer a running commentary on our exit arrangements, but since we are not going to do that as a Government, I will not do so now.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Last week’s news from Port Talbot was hugely welcomed in steel towns such as Corby. It came about because of constructive work not only in the House, but involving Ministers, the unions, the workforce and the industry. As we move towards reaching final agreement, what role does my hon. Friend see the industry playing in the industrial strategy, and what discussions has he had on that in the EU context?

Jesse Norman: That is more a matter for my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge.

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): Not Uxbridge—my constituency is Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner.

Jesse Norman: I stand corrected. We will leave the Foreign Secretary out of this.

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and other ministerial colleagues have had a series of meetings with steel companies across the production and supply chains, and have been able to give them the support and structure needed in that context.

Energy Bills

10. Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): What steps he is taking to help consumers reduce their energy bills.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): The retail energy market works well for those who are able and have the time to switch, with customers able to make savings of up to £300 by moving on to the cheapest tariffs. However, we want a market that works for all consumers, not just those who switch supplier. That is why we have been clear that we want energy companies to come forward with proposals on how they are going to treat their loyal customers fairly.

Justin Tomlinson: The Competition and Markets Authority has found that two thirds of households are on expensive standard variable tariffs. Does the Minister agree that suppliers should do more to ensure that their loyal customers are on better-value tariffs?

Margot James: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is not right that customers are penalised for their loyalty. We want energy companies to treat all their customers fairly, and not just customers who switch between suppliers. That is why we have challenged them to come forward with proposals to ensure that all their customers get a fair deal.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I have been saying for about five years now that companies have been overcharging their customers who are on the standard variable tariff. That has been confirmed by the Competition
and Markets Authority, Ofgem and the Government. The only way we will shift how those companies operate is by extending to those people on the standard variable tariff the protection we offer those on prepayment meters. Will the Minister meet me to discuss what more we can do to ensure that we give the big six energy companies a kick up the backside?

**Margot James:** I am happy to meet the right hon. Lady, who has extensive experience in this area. We are certainly considering the CMA remedies.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): A large number of rural properties are heated by oil-fired central heating. Will the Minister confirm that home efficiency measures are a vital way of cutting bills for those rural properties?

**Margot James:** I agree with my hon. Friend. Efficiency measures are fundamental to reducing the energy bills not just for people in rural areas, but for the population as a whole.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): This week, a senior Ofgem executive warned that, as a result of our higher reliance on renewable energy, consumers may face the possibility of having to pay a premium to ensure that they have a reliable source of electricity to their homes and without having their lights turned off. What discussions has the Minister had with Ofgem on that, and are the Government considering the policy of relying on costly renewable energy rather than on cheaper fossil fuels?

**Margot James:** We have an ongoing dialogue with Ofgem on a number of issues, but apropos the cost of supporting investment in low-carbon technologies, this is expected to increase, but so too are the savings from energy efficiency policies. This means that by 2020 household energy bills are still estimated to be lower on energy efficiency policies. This means that by 2020 household energy bills are still estimated to be lower on energy efficiency policies. This means that by 2020 household energy bills are still estimated to be lower on energy efficiency policies. This means that by 2020 household energy bills are still estimated to be lower on energy efficiency policies. This means that by 2020 household energy bills are still estimated to be lower on energy efficiency policies. This means that by 2020 household energy bills are still estimated to be lower on energy efficiency policies. This means that by 2020 household energy bills are still estimated to be lower on energy efficiency policies. This means that by 2020 household energy bills are still estimated to be lower on energy efficiency policies. This means that by 2020 household energy bills are still estimated to be lower on energy efficiency policies. This means that by 2020 household energy bills are still estimated to be lower on energy efficiency policies. This means that by 2020 household energy bills are still estimated to be lower on energy efficiency policies. This means that by 2020 household energy bills are still estimated to be lower on energy efficiency policies.

**Advanced Manufacturing**

11. **Philip Boswell** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What recent steps he has taken to develop confidence in the advanced manufacturing sector.

**Mr Nick Hurd:** We are working to make the UK even more competitive in advanced manufacturing by cutting corporation tax and red tape and by increasing our support for the research and innovation that is crucial to success. We are doing that not least through our £300 million investment in the high-value manufacturing catapult centre.

**Philip Boswell:** Given the potential increase in tariffs due to Brexit, how does the Minister plan to ensure that high-value manufacturing does not deteriorate?

**Mr Hurd:** High-value manufacturing is extremely important to our future—it presents many opportunities but also presents risks that we have to manage—and so will be an important part of our industrial strategy. On the broader concerns about tariffs, the hon. Gentleman has heard it often enough, so he should start believing it: the Government are listening carefully, as I witnessed yesterday, to manufacturing and other sectors about their priorities and concerns as we shape and finalise our negotiating position.

12. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the security of the UK’s energy supply between 2017 and 2020.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy** (Jesse Norman): National Grid’s electricity capacity report for this year was published in July and includes a forward look on electricity security. Through competitive capacity auctions, we have already secured capacity from 2018-19 to 2020-21, and in January we will hold a further auction to secure capacity for 2017-18. Our most recent gas security analysis was published in October and shows that our diverse and flexible gas supply can meet demand even under severe weather conditions.

Jeremy Lefroy: The importance of substantial gas storage to electricity generation and avoiding damaging price hikes was highlighted by the partial closure of the Rough storage facility. What are the Government doing to tackle the question of increasing gas storage for the future?

**Jesse Norman:** That is a proper and important question. Our gas supply arrangements are quite diverse, and we have more than 30% spare gas capacity even on a cold winter’s day. The system has been tested, and has responded well in the past to shocks, including higher than expected demand for heating or power and restrictions to supply infrastructure, but it is certainly something we keep under constant review.
19. [907837] Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): The success of carbon capture and storage is important to our energy security, which is why it was so disappointing that the Chancellor slashed £1 billion from the ring-fenced capital budget in the autumn statement. What are the Government doing to promote CCS?

Jesse Norman: All I can do is refer the hon. Gentleman to the earlier remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd) on this topic.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Avalon community energy on completion of its solar PV installation at Brookside school in Street? Does he agree that such schemes create a greener and cheaper energy system and afford us greater security of supply?

Jesse Norman: I certainly do, and I am very glad that my hon. Friend has brought that to the attention of the House.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): After the latest capacity auction, the overall scores for the procurement of new combined cycle gas generation plant stand at one small buildable plant over three auctions, at a total cost so far of £3 billion and £12 a year on customer bills. Does the Secretary of State have any other good ideas up his sleeve to secure the procurement and building of new capacity up to 2020?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the gas capacity market auction was an enormous success. It secured a widespread diversity of supply at low cost and in higher amounts than ever before, and it included some innovative new technologies. The Department should be celebrated for managing this.

Steel Council

13. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): When the joint Steel Council next plans to meet. [907829]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Steel Council will next meet in the new year. I will also meet senior steel industry chief executives and the trade union steel committee next month.

Chris Elmore: I am sure the Secretary of State will join me in congratulating all those involved in the Save our Steel campaign—especially the Community, GMB and Unite trade unions—on their vital contribution to the recent announcement on Port Talbot and other steel sectors across the UK. I am sure that he agrees that it is trade unionism at its best. Thousands of steelworkers and their families can look forward to a more certain 2017, but one of their real concerns remains their pensions. What will he do to bring forward better plans to ensure that steelworkers’ pensions, as well as their jobs, are protected?

Greg Clark: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in welcoming and congratulating the workforce, trade unions and the employers on their very constructive set of discussions. It is important that the membership is consulted, but this is a positive step forward and he is right that this will provide greater confidence to employees this winter. The hon. Gentleman will know that it is right and proper for the independent Pensions Regulator, rather than the Government, to approve and be content with pensions arrangements. It would be wrong for the Government to intervene in that.

22. [907840] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): One of the best ways to support the British steel industry is for the Government to invest in infrastructure. Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising the work of Severfield Steel, based in Lostock in my constituency, which is building the world’s first “squashed tennis racket style” railway bridge as part of the Ordsall Chord in Manchester?

Greg Clark: I will indeed congratulate Severfield Steel, which is a very successful company, not only on the Ordsall Chord but on winning a global award in recent weeks. It was also responsible for construction of the Olympic stadium, the Shard, and Birmingham New Street station. Many of the buildings that we admire and have in our minds are constructed with British steel by British companies.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): While we have recently had some really good news for the steel industry, giving steel workers and their families the stability they need for now, the fact that steel was not mentioned in the autumn statement gives cause for concern. Furthermore, the UK Government’s leading of a group of countries that are blocking the EU reform of anti-dumping trade defence instruments is another serious issue for the industry. Will the Secretary of State commit to including the steel industry in the future industrial strategy, and detail the steps that the Government will take to support this vital foundation industry?

Greg Clark: Of course steel is incredibly important, and it is important that it should have a bright future—we all want to see that. One thing I have been doing with the Minister for Climate Change and Industry, working closely with the steel industry on both the employer and trade union side, is to fund and bring together a strategic review, and the whole industry is coming together to work on it. That is expressly designed to inform our industrial strategy, so that we can look forward with confidence to a very successful steel industry.

Local Enterprise Partnerships

14. James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of local enterprise partnerships. [907830]

18. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of local enterprise partnerships. [907836]

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 14 and 21 together.

Local enterprise partnerships do extremely important work as voluntary partnerships, bringing together business insight, local authorities and universities to shape and support local growth, not least through growth deals that are funding more than 800 projects across England.
Mr Speaker: We are, in fact, grouping this question with Question 18. Ministers have to keep their eye on the Order Paper. The numbers change over a period, for reasons that I think will be fairly obvious to the Minister.

James Morris: There are 30,000 more businesses with high-speed broadband in the black country as a result of the leadership of the Black Country local enterprise partnership. Does the Minister agree that the Black Country LEP has been an excellent example of bringing together the private and public sector to drive growth, improve skills and build the infrastructure that the black country economy needs?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that to the attention of the House; it sounds like a fantastic deal that will unlock many opportunities for people and businesses in the black country. I hear great things about the LEP and the chairmanship of Stewart Towe, and through my hon. Friend, who I know has been a tireless champion of the LEP, I pass on the congratulations of the Government.

Sir Henry Bellingham: At a time when LEPs have been having a hard time in the media, is the Minister aware that my constituency is well served by two excellent LEPs: the New Anglia LEP and the Greater Cambridgeshire Greater Peterborough LEP? What wider role does he envisage for LEPs, and will he consider expanding the growing business fund?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for standing up for his LEPs at a difficult time for them as a result of the allegations made. I assure him that LEPs are at the heart of the process of feeding into the industrial strategy; we are absolutely clear that that industrial strategy needs to reflect deep understanding of the different challenges and opportunities each area faces, which is why the Secretary of State has allocated ministerial champions to each LEP.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): rose—

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman is very brief, I will take him now, but if he won’t, I won’t.

Clive Lewis: I will be very brief, Mr Speaker.

Some newspapers have exposed shocking examples of what I can only describe as crony capitalism in some of our LEPs. For example, the former elected mayor of Bristol, George Ferguson, received more than £50,000 for his own brewing firms while on the LEP board, which kept no minutes; perhaps the Minister is impressed to find right-wing politicians who can organise a booze-up in a brewery. Given that the Government are putting nearly £2 billion into LEPs through the autumn statement, can he tell us what they are doing to enforce basic standards of accountability?

Mr Speaker: I promise not to buy my dictionary from where the hon. Gentleman got his.

Mr Hurd: As was said the other day, never trust Labour Members when they say they are going to be brief.

The hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point about LEPs. This is taxpayers’ money and, as he would expect, we take extremely seriously any allegations about it being spent inappropriately, particularly when there are allegations of conflicts of interest. We are reassured by the prompt and robust response of LEPs to the individual allegations, including the one in Bristol, but we continue to press and make the point very strongly that we expect full compliance with the requirements of the strengthened national assurance framework.

Topical Questions

T1. [907806] Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Over the last month we have made substantial progress across the Department’s responsibilities. Our recently published review of corporate governance will make sure Britain is not only an excellent place to do business, but also is where business is done best. We continue to tackle climate change, ratifying the Paris agreement. My hon. Friend the Minister for Climate Change and Industry played an important part in the climate discussions in Marrakech, and he and I had the great pleasure of opening the Siemens wind turbine factory in Hull, creating 1,000 new jobs in that great city. By providing an additional £2 billion a year for research and innovation by 2020 and giving British homes and businesses certainty that their electricity demands will be met for the next five years, we are investing in our country’s economic future.

Neil Carmichael: That was a fabulous introduction to my question about the Hendry review. I know the Government have received the review, and I am confident that it makes some clear and useful recommendations, so I would like to know whether the Government intend to make it public soon, and what are their thoughts about some of Charles Hendry’s comments and recommendations?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I would have liked to put on record my gratitude to Charles Hendry for writing his report. It is important that it is published soon. Charles Hendry is travelling at the moment, but as soon as he is back I will agree with him a date to publish it and he can answer questions on it. It is a substantial document and so I think the House will understand that we will want to consider it and make our response in due course.

T5. [907810] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): New research from Edinburgh university finds that electricity generation from wind farms cuts even more greenhouse gas emissions than previously thought: almost 36 million tonnes over six years, the same as taking 2.3 million cars off the road. Meanwhile the Government’s own figures predict their renewables cuts will see 63 million tonnes more CO₂ being released into the atmosphere. Will the Minister clarify how the Government plan to continue cutting emissions, as the Leader of the House confirmed to me last week regarding ongoing commitments to climate change targets, while bringing in policies that will bump them up?

Mr Speaker: Order. Members need to understand that topical questions were always intended to be brief. We cannot have these three, four and five sentence questions. What one wants is a quick question.
The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): We will publish early our emissions reductions plan in the new year. It is a legal requirement on the Government to set out exactly how we expect to meet our long-term carbon commitments.

T2. [907807] Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), for the recent meeting in relation to my private Member’s Bill on the regulation of certain laser pens. Will she clarify when the consultation’s call for public evidence will start and when the Government will come forward with their conclusions?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his work to bring the misuse of laser pointers to the Government’s attention. The Government are concerned about the misuse of high-powered laser pointers and will seek evidence early next year on the potential options for tackling such misuse.

T3. [907808] Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): A review by academics at the Leeds University Business School and the University of Exeter found that every pound invested in the Union Learning Fund results in a return of £12.70, leading to an estimated net contribution to the economy of £1.45 million and an estimated return to the Exchequer of £3.57 for each pound spent. With that in mind, what steps are being taken to ensure much better engagement with the unions?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): We look forward to reading that research. It clearly contains some interesting findings, of which we will take full note.

T4. [907809] Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): With engineering and textiles doing particularly well in Huddersfield and Colne Valley, will the Department continue to commit to an industrial strategy that builds on our regional economic strengths?

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): The transition to a clean energy system is fundamental to our energy strategy, and significant supply chain opportunities will flow from that. As for the Government’s commitment to renewable energy, this country has seen one of the fastest deployments of renewable energy across Europe since 2010, and the hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have renewed that commitment through the contract for difference auctions.

T5. [907810] Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Will my hon. Friend ensure that those who benefit from self-employment are aware of the different kinds of national insurance contributions? Will she also ensure that they pay the correct NI class, so that they are able to access the full range of support available to other types of jobseeker in the event that they re-enter the jobs market?

Margot James: Earlier this year, the Prime Minister commissioned Matthew Taylor to carry out an independent review of modern employment practices, such as in my hon. Friend’s example, as part of ensuring that our economy works for everyone. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will also consider my hon. Friend’s suggestion.

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): We will publish early our emissions reductions plan in the new year. It is a legal requirement on the Government to set out exactly how we expect to meet our long-term carbon commitments.

T6. [907811] Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Will my hon. Friend ensure that those who benefit from self-employment are aware of the different kinds of national insurance contributions? Will she also ensure that they pay the correct NI class, so that they are able to access the full range of support available to other types of jobseeker in the event that they re-enter the jobs market?

Margot James: Earlier this year, the Prime Minister commissioned Matthew Taylor to carry out an independent review of modern employment practices, such as in my hon. Friend’s example, as part of ensuring that our economy works for everyone. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will also consider my hon. Friend’s suggestion.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The energy-intensive industries compensation scheme is due to end in April 2017. The Government have promised to bring forward legislation to exempt energy-intensive industries from renewable obligations and feed-in tariffs, but we are still waiting for that to happen. As things stand, the steel industry is therefore looking down the barrel of having
to go back to the crippling energy costs it faced until the compensation package was introduced. Will the Secretary of State assure us that measures will be put in place before April 2017 to ensure that we do not go back to that situation?

Greg Clark: The discussions we have had with the steel sector emphasise the importance of energy costs, and our commitment is to work with the sector to bring them down.

T8. [907813] Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Skills have been removed from the Department’s portfolio, yet for many businesses in the Bradford district access to talent remains a key challenge. So how will the Secretary of State ensure that education policy dovetails with his Department’s priorities to ensure that businesses have access to the skills they need?

Joseph Johnson: With higher and further education policy, apprenticeships and skills in a single Department, the Government can now take a comprehensive, end-to-end view of skills and education. This Government will, of course, support people from their early years through to postgraduate study and work.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Is it not time for the Secretary of State to order an investigation into the Royal Bank of Scotland’s practices on lending to small businesses?

Margot James: The situation with RBS is under review and I am sure proposals will be made in the near future.

T9. [907814] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Now that the future of Hinkley Point is secure, what further plans does my right hon. Friend have for nuclear energy to form a key part of our energy supply industry?

Greg Clark: It is important that nuclear energy should form a key part of that. One of the pieces of neglect of the previous Labour Government is that they presided over the forecast closure of our nuclear fleet without making any plans to replace it. When I made the statement about Hinkley Point C, I also said that this would be the beginning of a new era of civil nuclear power in this country, and that is absolutely right.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): In the week when we saw a great deal between Tata Steel and the Community trade union, largely down to Roy Rickhuss and the return of Ratan Tata, we also saw the merger of Baosteel and Wuhan Iron and Steel. What risk assessment has the Department made of market economy status for China and its effects on the British steel industry?

Greg Clark: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to both Ratan Tata and Roy Rickhuss, as both the company and the unions have worked constructively together, and the progress is welcome. I have, with the Minister for Climate Change and Industry, a very regular dialogue with both employers and trade unions. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have been active in making sure that we have the right trade defences against practices where countries dump steel unfairly in the UK market.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Although business rates are set by the Valuation Office Agency, rather than by the Government, it is right the Government then try to soften the blow for those most affected. Will the Minister expand on what is being done to protect the businesses using solar panels that have been adversely impacted by high business rates?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend is right to point out that these rates are set independently. She will also know that the overall net effect of the reforms is to reduce business rates and that some transitional relief is in place. She is also right to highlight the challenges in respect of businesses that have installed solar for their own use, and we are working through that issue.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): When will the Government publish their response to the Law Commission’s report on “Consumer Prepayments on Retailer Insolvency”? We need to do more to protect consumers when businesses go into administration.

Margot James: I will note the hon. Lady’s comments and I will write to her. I am sorry, but I did not hear all of the question.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): INEOS, Tata Chemicals and Banner Chemicals in my constituency provide high-quality, high-wage, high-skilled jobs. What consideration has been given to energy price competitiveness in respect of our European neighbours, as a more competitive energy price would disproportionately benefit the northern powerhouse?

Greg Clark: As I said to a number of hon. Members, the energy prices that are paid by businesses generally, and by energy-intensive industries in particular, are a crucial part of competitiveness, and we want to work with these industries to reduce the costs.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Nissan has benefited from a pre-Brexit deal. What reassurance can the Secretary of State offer Brighton-based businesses such as American Express and EDF that, after Brexit, they will still be able to have an open and free relationship with the EU?

Greg Clark: American Express is a very important employer in Brighton, and it is very welcome here. It has located itself in this country because Britain is a fantastic place from which to do business. That is the message that I receive wherever I travel to in the world. There is great appetite to invest in Britain, and the hon. Gentleman will know of our recent success stories. I hope that American Express will continue to invest more and employ more in his constituency.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Following the collapse of the Greater Lincolnshire devolution deal, the LEPs in Humber and Greater Lincolnshire take on a greater significance, but there is concern that some central Government funding may be lost as a result of the collapse of the deal. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the LEPs will be used to channel the funds from his Department when suitable projects are identified?
Greg Clark: As my hon. Friends on the Front Bench have said, we regard local growth as a very important component of our industrial strategy, and my hon. Friend knows that I have been a big champion of local growth, so I want to see more of that. Obviously, certain offers were part of the proposed deal, but these deals are never compulsory, and if the councils and the businesses do not want to proceed then it is a matter for them.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree that, as part of the industrial strategy, the future development of enterprise zones will be of great economic benefit, especially to the manufacturing sector?

Greg Clark: I agree that enterprise zones have been successful. They have provided some tax advantages and, in many cases, a simplified regulatory environment, which is very attractive to businesses. Their experience commends them.
CQC: NHS Deaths Review

12.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement. On 12 April, I asked the Care Quality Commission to conduct an investigation into lessons that needed to be learned following the tragic death of Connor Sparrowhawk in 2013 at Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust. I pay tribute to his family, and particularly to his mother, Sara Ryan, for persistently and determinedly campaigning for a proper investigation into what happened. The lesson of Mid Staffs, Morecambe Bay and indeed other injustices such as Hillsborough is that when families speak out, we must listen. In this case, thanks to Dr Ryan’s efforts, many improvements will be made to the care of people with learning disabilities and many lives will be saved.

I asked the CQC to look at what happened at Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust and to assess more broadly what lessons there are for the NHS as a whole. Its findings make sobering reading. Among other findings, the report says that families and carers often have a poor experience of mortality investigations; that they are sometimes not treated with kindness, respect and sensitivity; that they can feel that their involvement is tokenistic; and that they often question the independence of the reports.

The report also says that the NHS does not prioritise learning from deaths and misses countless opportunities to learn and improve as a result, and that there is no single framework that sets out how local NHS organisations should identify, analyse and learn from deaths of patients in their care or those who have recently been in their care. As a result, there is inconsistency. Some NHS trusts get elements of mortality reporting right, but not one gets all the elements right. In particular, the leaders of NHS organisations and their doctors, nurses and other staff simply do not have access to the full picture of how many patients die in their care, which deaths were preventable, and what needs to be learned.

I thank Professor Sir Mike Richards and his CQC colleagues for an extremely thoughtful and thorough report. I am accepting all their recommendations. From 31 March next year, the boards of all NHS trusts and foundation trusts will be required to collect a range of specified information on potentially avoidable deaths and serious incidents, and to consider what lessons need to be learned, on a regular basis. This will include estimates of how many deaths could have been prevented in their own organisation and an assessment of why this might vary positively or negatively from the national average, based on methodology adapted by the Royal College of Physicians from work done by Professor Nick Black and Dr Helen Hogan.

We will require trusts to publish that information quarterly, in accordance with regulations that I will lay before the House, so that patients and the public can see whether and where progress is being made. Alongside those data, trusts will publish evidence of learning and action that is happening as a consequence of that information. They will feed the information back to NHS Improvement at a national level so that the whole NHS can learn more rapidly from individual incidents.

All trusts will be asked to identify a board-level leader as patient safety director to take responsibility for this agenda and ensure that it is prioritised and resourced within their organisation. This person is likely to be the medical director. They will be asked to appoint a non-executive director to take oversight of progress.

We will ensure that investigations of any deaths that may be the result of problems in care are more thorough and that they genuinely involve families and carers. More broadly, instead of the patchwork approach that we currently have, all trusts will be asked to follow a standardised national framework for identifying potentially avoidable deaths, reviewing the care provided and learning from mistakes.

I have asked the NHS National Quality Board, which includes senior clinicians from all national NHS organisations, to draw up guidance on reviewing and learning from the care provided to people who die, in consultation with Keith Conradi, the new chief investigator of healthcare safety. These guidelines will be published before the end of March next year, for implementation by all trusts in the year starting next April. We will also be working with the National Quality Board to ensure that much more support is offered to bereaved families.

As the report highlights issues around support to families, Health Education England will be asked to review the training for all doctors and nurses with respect to engaging with patients and families after a tragedy and, equally importantly, maintaining their own mental health and resilience in extremely challenging situations.

As the report identified particular concerns about the treatment of people with learning disabilities, we will take two further actions. In acute trusts we will ask for particular priority to be given to identifying patients with a mental health problem or a learning disability to make sure that their care responds to their particular needs, and that particular trouble is taken over any mortality investigations to ensure that wrong assumptions are not made about the inevitability of death. We will also ensure that the NHS reviews and learns from all deaths of people with learning disabilities, in all settings.

The learning disabilities mortality review—LeDeR—programme will provide support to families and local NHS areas to enable reporting and an independent, standardised review of all learning disability deaths of people between the ages of four and 74.

We will ensure that there is coverage in all regions by the end of next year and full national roll-out by 2019. As the programme develops, all learnings will be transferred to the national avoidable mortality programme. I have today asked the LeDeR programme to provide annual reports to the Department of Health on its findings and how best to take forward the learnings across the NHS.

From next year we will become the first country in the world to publish data on avoidable deaths at a hospital-by-hospital level.

I want to address the issue of how we ensure that data published about avoidable deaths are accurate, fair and meaningful, and that the process of publication rewards openness and honesty. Of course we will be working closely with the CQC, NHS Improvement and senior NHS doctors and nurses to get this right, but I want to make it clear to the House that I will not be setting any target for reducing reported avoidable deaths, and nor do I believe it will be valid to compare numbers between hospitals because the data depend on clinical views that...
may change or vary. I expect—this might surprise some in the House—to see an increase in the number of reported avoidable deaths. This is more likely to be because hospitals get better at spotting and reporting them than because care is deteriorating.

We should also remember that when there is a tragedy in the NHS, there is always a second victim—namely, the doctor or nurse involved, who invariably suffers huge anguish. So let us today also give credit to all NHS front-line staff for the changes that are already taking place to improve patient safety. For example, the number of people experiencing the four main hospital harms is down by a third since November 2012; MRSA and clostridium difficile rates have halved since 2010; and we have 10,000 more hospital nurses in our wards since the Francis report, and they are now at record numbers.

There is a new healthcare safety investigations branch to perform speedy, no-blame inquiries into avoidable harm and death, modelled on the successful system that has operated in the airline industry for many years. There is also a consultation concluding this week on legislation to create a safe space for NHS staff to talk openly about how to improve the safety of care for patients, without having to worry about litigation or professional consequences.

The culture of the NHS is changing following a number of tragedies, but this report shows that there is much progress to be made in the collection of information about unexpected deaths, analysis of what was preventable and learning from the results. Only by implementing the report’s recommendations in full will we honour the memory of Connor Sparrowhawk, and I commend the statement to the House.

12.46 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, and I thank the CQC for its report.

Any death is a tragedy for families, but when that death could have been prevented, or was the fault of a system that is meant to care for our loved ones, the trauma is all the more difficult to cope with. The circumstances of Connor Sparrowhawk’s death were shocking, and I, like the Secretary of State, pay tribute to his family, who have fought so hard for justice and to ensure other families do not have to go through what they went through. Connor Sparrowhawk’s step-father, Richard, told Radio 5 live:

“When a loved one dies in care, knowing how and why they died is the very least a family should be able to expect”.

We agree.

The findings of the CQC are a wake-up call: relatives shut out of investigations; reasonable questions going unanswered; and grieving families made to feel like a “pain in the neck” or feeling they would be better dealt with at a “supermarket checkout”. This is totally unacceptable—it is shameful and it has to change. We therefore strongly welcome the recommendation of a national framework and the specific measures the Secretary of State has outlined today. I assure him we will work with him and the Care Quality Commission to support the establishment of such a framework in a timely fashion.

Families and patients should not be forgotten in this process. Will the Secretary of State pledge that families and carers will be equal partners in developing the Government’s plans for implementing the CQC’s recommendations? Does he agree that those who work in the NHS show extraordinary compassion, good will and professionalism? Does he accept that when something, sadly and tragically, goes wrong, it can often be the result of a number of interplaying systemic failures and that therefore a national framework will provide welcome standards and guidance across the service?

Does the Secretary of State recall that the National Patient Safety Agency was responsible for monitoring patient safety incidents in the NHS, including medication and prescribing errors, before it was scrapped under the Health and Social Care Act 2012? Will he perhaps acknowledge in retrospect that scrapping that agency was a mistake?

For such a national framework and the Secretary of State’s proposed measures to succeed, investment will be necessary. Will hospitals and trusts receive extra funding to carry out the additional requirements that the CQC has recommended? More generally, hospitals across England are suffering chronic staff shortages, which is leaving doctors and nurses overstretched and struggling to do basic tasks. We all recall that Sir Robert Francis called for safe nurse staffing levels to be published by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, but this guidance has been blocked. Will the Secretary of State now consider committing to NICE publishing safe nurse staffing levels, as recommended by the Francis report?

The Secretary of State is aware of the wider pressures on the service. Will he acknowledge that cuts to social care and the failure to provide it with extra investment in the autumn statement two weeks ago are leaving hospitals dangerously overstretched, with patients at risk of harm?

The Secretary of State will also be aware of the pressures on mental health provision. Over the weekend, we saw reports that bed shortages in England are now such that seriously ill patients with eating disorders are having to travel hundreds of miles for treatment. What does he make of this practice, and does he consider it safe and sustainable?

May I ask the Secretary of State about the heart-breaking case of the death of baby Elizabeth Dixon? I know that he has spoken of this in the past. He rightly ordered an investigation, but I understand from the family that 16 months down the line the investigation has not started. Will he provide the House with an update?

The CQC has called for the issues addressed in its report to be a national priority, and for all those involved in delivering safe care to review the findings and publish a full report. We absolutely agree. Action is needed. We welcome the recommendations and stand ready to work with the Government to ensure that these issues are no longer ignored.

Mr Hunt: I thank the shadow Health Secretary for the constructive nature of his comments. He is absolutely right in that, because this issue can unite people in all parts of the House. In fairness, these tragedies happen when those on either side of the House are responsible for the NHS, and we all have a responsibility to work to do better than we are doing at the moment.
I particularly agree with the hon. Gentleman that front-line doctors and nurses work incredibly hard, and we need to get away from a blame culture when these tragedies happen. That blame culture is the root cause of why we are not learning as we should from the problems that arise, because people are worried about what will happen to them personally if they speak out. We have seen this with a number of tragedies. Through the national framework, we are trying to move away from a blame culture. Of course people have to be held accountable. If there is gross negligence and people do totally irresponsible things, then there must be no hiding place and proper accountability: that is what families rightly insist on. For the vast majority of the time, however, people are just trying to do their jobs as best they can. As he rightly says, it is often a systemic problem that can be solved with systemic changes. We are now trying to implement the culture of investigation that has worked so successfully in the airline industry and other industries.

I absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that families and carers will be equal partners as we develop the new national guidance. This area was one of the most shocking things about the CQC report. I am sure that it was a great surprise to many people in the NHS how excluded many families felt. We clearly have to do better in that respect.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the National Patient Safety Agency, and I pay credit to Sir Liam Donaldson, who was chief medical officer under the previous Labour Government and a great champion of patient safety, but we now have different structures in place. The new CQC inspection regime and the healthcare safety investigation branch are giving equal, if not greater, priority to patient safety.

We discuss on many occasions the funding issues that the hon. Gentleman raised, as I think he is acknowledging with his facial expressions. The point I would make, because we have had a good exchange and I do not want to go into the specific politics of NHS funding, is that this is a win-win, because a voidable harm and mistakes are not repeated. One of the really important things we need to get right is to make sure that when something goes wrong in one place, there is a national way in which the lessons can be conveyed right across the NHS as quickly as possible.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I welcome this statement and remember the discussion of this tragic case. Obviously the majority of people who go into hospital and die in hospital will be people who are simply too ill for us to save, but we must not be nihilistic in imagining that that applies to everybody. The particular failure here was that people with learning difficulties or mental health needs were somehow just set aside and not looked at.

I welcome the idea of a safety board; there will be lots of things that can be learned and shared in that. I slightly pick up the Secretary of State on what he said about the Scottish patient safety programme, which is a national programme that has been running since the beginning of 2008. Part of that was about breaking down all the barriers, very much like in the airline business—being on first-name terms and making it everybody’s business so that even the cleaner in the theatre feels they can point out that they think a mistake is going to be made, but then when something happens having these adverse case reviews. In my hospital, we also reviewed near misses, and I commend that. It means that there is a review when what might have happened would have been serious. Certainly in the cases that I have been involved in, the family have been involved repeatedly. That is really important.

I also welcome the idea of a safe place for whistleblowers. People who have raised issues in the past and have been appallingly treated by the NHS still stand there as a terrible example to those who currently work in the NHS, so there needs to be some ability to go back to these old cases and provide justice for people who have ended up losing their careers by trying to raise patient safety issues.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution. I recognise the progress made in the Scottish patient programme, and particularly the inspirational leadership of Jason Leitch, who has done a fantastic job in Scotland and some very pioneering work.

The hon. Lady made some good points that I will take in reverse order. On whistleblowers, I asked Sir Robert Francis to look at this in his second report. He concluded that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to go back over historical cases, because the courts have
pronounced and it is very difficult to create a fair process where legal judgments have already been made. However, I take on board what she says, and I do not think that that means that we cannot learn from what has happened in previous cases; they are very powerful voices.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right about near misses, and we will include that issue in the “learning from mistakes” ambition.

The hon. Lady is most right of all about people with learning disabilities. The heart of the problem is deciding when a death was expected and when it was unexpected. About half of us die in hospitals. As she rightly says, the vast majority of those deaths are expected, but when a person has a learning difficulty it is very easy for a wrong assumption to be made that they would have died anyway. That is a prejudice that we have to tackle, and one that Connor Sparrowhawk’s mother talks about extremely powerfully. We have to make sure that this is not just about lessons for the whole NHS, but particularly about ensuring that we do better for people who have learning disabilities.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on learning disability, for me the most chilling phrase in the foreword of the report was when Mike Richards and his team said:

“We found that the level of acceptance and sense of inevitability when people with a learning disability or mental illness die early is too common.”

Will the Secretary of State put on the record what Mike Richards says in the report, namely that there can be no tolerance of treating the deaths of people with learning disabilities with any less importance than the deaths of any other patient in the national health service?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to put on the record the fact that those words have the Government’s wholehearted support. I credit my right hon. Friend for his work leading the APPG. I commissioned the CQC report because a year ago we had a report by Mazars on what happened at Southern Health, which said that only 19% of unexpected deaths were investigated and that that fell to 1% for people with learning disabilities. That cannot be acceptable, and it is why it is so important that we act on today’s report.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I seek the indulgence of the House while I raise a personal issue. This Thursday I should have been attending the inquest into my father’s death, which I anticipate will conclude that his death was avoidable. An hour ago I was notified that one of the key witnesses will not be attending because the hospital had incorrect contact details for him—he was a locum, and was unaware that the inquest was taking place. For the second time, therefore, it is being cancelled. Will the Secretary of State tell us whether the report looked into the issue of locum doctors—the pressure, and the failure to learn lessons because so many people in the health service, and in A&E in particular, come to the specific hospital on a one-off occasion, which is partly the cause of the defensiveness in the system?

Mr Hunt: First, I am sure the whole House will join me in offering my condolences to the hon. Gentleman for what happened to his father. The incredible grief that he and others feel when they lose a family member is compounded if it is subsequently discovered that the death was avoidable.

The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. The CQC was not specifically looking at the issue of locums in this report, but in many other reports, on many occasions, it has talked about the dangers of locum and agency staff for precisely the reason he mentions. It is partly because people are not necessarily around at the time of an investigation, as they have moved on and work somewhere else, but it is also partly because, as I am sure we all believe, staff can give better care if they are in a team of people who know and trust each other. That is not possible if the majority of staff are employed on a temporary basis. He makes a very important point.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is clear that half of medical negligence claims are in the field of maternity. Does the Secretary of State agree that the fear of legal action often prevents people from speaking out? How will the safe space be created that does not allow lawyers to intervene—very often lawyers slow up the process? An early admission of fault and a willingness to express the fact that lessons have been learned would provide so much comfort for families.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend has spoken very eloquently about that issue many times in this House. If a baby is born with a serious brain injury there will typically be a court case that lasts 11 years, and a settlement of around £6 million. That family are having to cope with the shock of having a disabled child—some families say that that is a kind of mourning process because the baby is not the one they were expecting, although they then go on to give the most extraordinary love to that child—and we compound it by making them go through a legal process that lasts more than a decade. It is absolutely shocking and despicable if that happens. We need to find a way to get those families the financial support that they need earlier, and make sure that we learn the lessons more quickly. That is absolutely what this agenda is all about.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I also pay tribute to Sara Ryan, the mother of Connor Sparrowhawk, who has fought tirelessly for justice for those with learning disabilities. I warn the Secretary of State that I think she will take some convincing that things really will change, given all the resistance she has come up against. I hope he has managed to meet her; if not, would he be willing to meet her, with me, to discuss the plans going forward?

One key issue not covered in the report or statement is the timeliness of investigations. A report nine months or a year after the incident is often no good at all: the organisation has moved on, and people have forgotten what has happened. I commend Mersey Care, which does a very quick, thorough investigation within 48 hours, when the information is really current and people are still shocked by what has happened. That is how Mersey Care seeks to implement the lessons from every tragedy.

Mr Hunt: I want to put on the record that the right hon. Gentleman was a big champion for people with learning disabilities when he was in my ministerial
team, in particular over issues such as Winterbourne View, which he brought to my attention and did a huge amount of positive work on.

I have met Sara Ryan. I spoke to her again yesterday. I repeat what I said in my statement: that without her campaigning we would not now be making the huge changes on a national level that we are. I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s other comments.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The review found that acute and community trusts do not always record whether a patient has a mental health illness or learning disability. What steps will we take—such as, for example, the expansion of liaison psychiatry services—to make sure there is proper join-up and real parity of esteem?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We are making sure that all A&Es have liaison psychiatry services by the end of this Parliament. The critical issue is that someone with a severe mental health problem or learning disability who turns up in an A&E has special needs, and has bigger needs than the other patient there, but unless that is recognised early in the process, they are unlikely to get the care they need. If a tragedy then happens and they go on to die—as sadly happens sometimes—but the illness or disability is not known about, people do not realise that there are other potential issues. That is why the report is very clear that all acute trusts are required to know when patients have learning disabilities or mental health problems and to pay particular attention in any mortality investigations that happen regarding those patients.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The CQC has produced a grim report, and there was an even grimmer internal report on maternity services operated by Pennine Acute NHS Trust. Mothers and babies have died. I have put in parliamentary questions to the right hon. Gentleman and talked to the chief executive to try to find out which of those deaths were avoidable. I welcome today’s statement, but is it possible to be retrospective, so that the families of those people who have died in the Pennine maternity service can find out whether those deaths were preventable?

Mr Hunt: When the new guidelines are published, we need to investigate, as far as we possibly can, deaths that have already happened. I totally recognise the hon. Gentleman’s picture of Pennine and share his real worry about the standard of care in that trust. The positive thing is that under the leadership of Sir David Dalton—the chief executive of Salford Royal, which is one of the safest trusts in the NHS and a CQC outstanding trust—things are beginning to turn around. I have spoken to him about the situation at Pennine on many occasions. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is a lot of work to do there.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Many people will be shocked to hear that some trusts do not even know how many in-patients have died in their care. Will my right hon. Friend say more about what action should be taken against boards and leaders who are negligent in that way?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Boards now have a legal duty of candour, and are obliged to tell patients the truth about what has happened when something goes wrong, but how can they possibly do so if they do not properly record deaths or avoidable deaths? That is why this is a very significant moment. From next year, on a quarterly basis, all trusts will be publishing how many avoidable deaths there are in the trust. Those figures will be compared with national benchmarks. That is how we will start to make boards feel that they have a critical responsibility on this.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I welcome the learning disability mortality review that the Secretary of State has announced, but I am keen to ensure that it includes unexpected deaths in care settings other than the NHS. When I was first elected, Longcroft, which purported to be a care home for people with learning disabilities, was actually a torture chamber for people with learning disabilities. We have ended that kind of thing, but we need to ensure that unexplained deaths of people with learning disabilities in other care settings are fully investigated, and that those investigations feed into this review.

Mr Hunt: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right. I will take away with me the question of what the legal responsibilities will be for people in adult social care settings. One thing the report highlights, which I had not particularly anticipated, was the problem that a number of people with learning disabilities are cared for in multiple settings, so if there is a tragedy, the place where the tragedy happens may not be the place responsible for what went wrong. Often, the person’s previous care provider never even finds out that that person has died. One thing that Sir Mike Richards talks about is making sure that all care providers are informed promptly when something happens, so that there can be a multi-institution examination of what went wrong.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and the measures that he has announced. I have been supporting the family of a constituent who died unexpectedly in hospital, and they have suffered at every step along the way. There has been a wall of silence, the trust has refused to co-operate and the CQC has refused to investigate. Every step along the way, the family have been frustrated. That has been made even more important by the fact that the son of the deceased is a doctor in the NHS, and he knows that processes have been badly handled. All he wants is for the NHS to learn from its mistakes. Will my right hon. Friend undertake to say what he will do about the number of unexplained deaths that have occurred in the NHS over the past few years, and whether any of those cases can be examined by an appropriate authority?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to look personally at the case that my hon. Friend talks about. I think he speaks for all patients and families who have suffered tragedies when he says that the only thing people want is for lessons to be learned. A more challenging issue is that staff sometimes do not feel empowered to speak out in such situations, and they worry about the consequences. A number of trusts have an outstanding learning culture that is really supportive of staff, but that is not the case...
everywhere. One of the big lessons from today is that we must work out how to spread that positive culture across the NHS.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On 10 December last year, I asked:

“Is the Secretary of State satisfied that families seeking truth and justice for their loved ones are having to rely on pro bono lawyers for advice and representation, and on crowdsourcing to get legal advice?”

He said:

“It should never come down to lawyers.”—[Official Report, 10 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 1147]

Sadly, we all know that, on occasion, it will come down to lawyers getting involved. Will any of the recommendations from the CQC cover such eventualities?

Mr Hunt: It is a difficult one, because access to lawyers is a matter for the Ministry of Justice. I am not trying to duck the issue, but my responsibility, in what we are trying to do today, is to try to make sure that families do not feel as though they need to go to lawyers, because the NHS is open and transparent enough. With the values of people in the NHS, I think that ought to be achievable. I am happy to look at the case that she raises, and to bring it up with my colleague the Lord Chancellor.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Secretary of State tell the House more about the healthcare safety investigation branch? How big will it be, who will head it up, where will it be based and how will it use its forensic detective work locally to get to the nitty gritty of the things that cause problems for hospitals?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. The best way to understand what we are trying to achieve—this relates to what the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) said earlier about the speed of investigation—is to think about the tragedy of the recent Croydon tram crash. Within one week of the accident, the rail accident investigation branch produced and published a full investigation into exactly what happened, which made it possible to transmit that learning around the whole tram industry. That is what we are looking for. We have modelled the healthcare safety investigation branch on what happens in the transport industry. It has already been set up, and we are lucky that the person heading it up is Keith Conradi, who headed up the air accident investigation branch and knows exactly how these things should happen.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The CQC clearly identifies the need for a change in culture, and the Secretary of State acknowledged that a number of times in his remarks today. The NHS has to be less defensive, and it needs to be more honest and open with families if there is to be a genuine commitment to reflect, learn and make sure that things are different in future. What does he think are the barriers to ensuring that that culture change takes place, and what steps does he intend to take to overcome those barriers?

Mr Hunt: There are a number of barriers, one of which is time. Staff feel very pressured for time. I strongly argue that it is a false economy not to allow time for lessons to be learned, because tragedies, when they happen, take up a huge amount of time. From a management and leadership point of view, we have to make sure that doctors and nurses are given the time for reflective learning as part of what they do.

Another thing is the management culture. If people feel that the management of their trust are open and listening, they are more likely to be open and listening to themselves. If they feel that there is a hire-and-fire culture, they are less likely to take that approach. There are a number of lessons.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given the case of three-year-old Sam Morrish, who died at Torbay hospital in 2010, and the conclusions of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman that many investigations into avoidable deaths were not fit for purpose, I welcome the statement. I also welcome the spirit of openness that will follow in relation to these extremely difficult issues. We are, ultimately, all mortal. Although I think it is absolutely right that we will not be setting targets, will the Secretary of State reassure me about the ongoing monitoring we will undertake and the proactive work we will do with trusts to reduce the number of such incidents?

Mr Hunt: As my hon. Friend knows, I have met the parents of Sam Morrish—Scott and Sue Morrish—on a number of occasions. They described how when their son died, all the shutters came down. I met them only a few months after I became Health Secretary, and that engrained itself on my memory because it was so awful to hear about what they were doing.

My hon. Friend raises a rather sensitive issue, which I tried to talk about in my statement. I expect, as a result of the changes, the number of reported avoidable deaths to increase. If that happens, I do not think that it will necessarily mean that patient care is suffering. We have to be very careful, in this House and with our local newspapers, to say that if trusts start to report an increased number of avoidable deaths, it might mean that they have a more transparent culture and are being more open. Their standards about what is expected and what is unexpected may start to change as they realise that things could have been done to prevent a death that they might previously have described as expected. We have a duty, as Members, to encourage responsible reporting of this new openness, and that, in turn, will help staff.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I want to pick up on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins). A constituent of mine who is an agency nurse told me that she had been left in charge of 24 fragile patients, some of whom had the norovirus, on a ward that she did not know very well, with only two healthcare professionals working with her. Given that, will the Secretary of State now commit to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence publishing safe nursing staffing levels, as recommended by the Francis report?

Mr Hunt: NICE has published its staffing levels for wards. I recognise the problem, and it is exactly what we were dealing with in the Francis report. We now have 10,000 more full-time nurses on our hospital wards than
we had three years ago. We are making significant progress, but there is still huge pressure on hospital wards. We have developed a new methodology that more accurately makes sure that patients get the care that they need, whether it is from a nurse, a healthcare assistant or whoever else in the hospital. I am happy to write to the hon. Lady and tell her what that guidance is.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. The families of those who died in the care of Southern Health in Hampshire have played a vital role in campaigning for transparency and improvements, and they include the family of David Hinks from Havant. Will the Secretary of State join me in commending the families for their work in the most distressing of circumstances?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely do so. I know that the family of David Hinks have campaigned very strongly on this matter. The key point about families is that they are often the people who know best what happened to individuals when something went wrong, because they saw the care at every single stage. Whether the care took place in a care home, hospital or a GP surgery, families are likely to have seen the whole thing, and can really help us to understand what might have gone wrong. They are therefore a positive force in this process.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I am so pleased that the Secretary of State took the time to praise James Titcombe and other campaigners in my constituency who have done so much to help to break down the culture of secrecy and cover-up that has afflicted too many of our trusts. The right hon. Gentleman deserves real credit for his determination, and I hope that the tone he has struck today will last and that we do not go back to the accusatory and vindictive tone that, I am afraid, too often marred discussions about this during the last Parliament. Finally—thank you for your indulgence, Mr Speaker—will the Secretary of State say more about the tension between the families’ desire for individual accountability and the need to encourage a culture of openness in which people can come forward?

Mr Hunt: In fairness to the hon. Gentleman, he makes two important points. I know that he worked very closely with James Titcombe, who is one of his constituents.

We are now learning the right way to deal with the tension between accountability and having a learning culture. Essentially, this boils down to an understanding that 98% of the time a mistake is made because of a systems problem—a structure or a framework that did not enable a doctor or a nurse to operate to the best of their ability—while 2%, 1% or perhaps even less of the time it is a case of genuine negligence by an individual that deserves full accountability. When we understand it in that way, we start to realise that the first thing to ask is what could be changed in the system, but if we uncover bad behaviour by individuals—there are 1.3 million people in the NHS, so it is obviously going to happen at some stage—then there of course needs to be full accountability.

On the tone of these exchanges, let me say something optimistic: I really do believe that the NHS can become the safest, highest-quality healthcare system in the world. That would be welcomed by the Labour party, as the party that was in power when the NHS was set up, and we would welcome it as part of our absolute commitment to higher standards in public services. There is no country in the world that is even considering what we have announced today, which is to ask hospitals to publish the number of their avoidable deaths on a quarterly basis. It is a very big step that can happen in a system built around public service.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Kevin, the son of my constituent Desmond Watts, suffered from very significant learning difficulties and was neglected in a care home in the county, which led to his tragic death. This was completely avoidable. Des has never seen justice for Kevin, but I know that he would want my right hon. Friend to consider whether it is possible to apply to social care some of the principles that he has set out today. I join the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) in encouraging him to do that.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I will have discussions with the Minister responsible for social care, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), about what we can do in the social care field. I am optimistic that we can do something, because if we make this part of the framework of the new CQC inspection regime—obviously, that has to happen with the consent of the CQC—we can create a very strong incentive for adult social care providers to do what we want and to follow what is happening in the NHS.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I, too, want to raise the issue of the appalling neglect in medical care at Pennine Acute. The report—the extremely damning report—only came to light following the persistence of Jennifer Williams, a journalist on the Manchester Evening News, and the bravery of a whistleblower at the trust. I know that the Secretary of State will do what he can to protect whistleblowers, but how will he enforce a no-blame culture and a culture of openness in a trust such as Pennine Acute that appears to have tried actively to suppress this extremely damning report?

Mr Hunt: There should be no hiding place for managers who neglect their legal responsibility, which is the duty of candour that we in this place passed into law in 2014. That is my first point. It is also important to be realistic about the ability to impose a culture on organisations by ministerial diktat, but we can achieve that because this is something that NHS staff want. In some ways, what is most worrying about Pennine is that Salford Royal, one of the best hospitals in the NHS, is virtually next door to it, but the transmission of learning at Salford Royal did not seem to penetrate even into a neighbouring hospital. That is why we must get much better at sharing learning between hospitals.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Will the Secretary of State say more about how the additional and extra information he has mentioned, which will be so important for patient groups in judging rates of progress, will be made available?
Mr Hunt: I am happy to do so. We will lay down in regulations in the House that the information must be published for all trusts on a quarterly basis. I draw my hon. Friend’s attention to what I said in the statement, which is that it is not legitimate to compare the numbers in different trusts, because trusts will have different levels of reporting. In fact, our better trusts may actually have higher levels of reported avoidable deaths because they are better at picking up these things.

Derek Twigg (Hulton) (Lab): One of the recommendations says:

“Greater clarity is needed to support agencies working together to investigate deaths and to identify improvements needed across services and commissioning.”

How is that going to happen?

Mr Hunt: This is a very complex issue, but it is a very important one, particularly for people with learning disabilities who are users of the services of multiple organisations. The National Quality Board will put together guidance before the end of March, so that we can roll this out across the whole NHS during next year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, and indeed his commitment to retraining and his recognition of its importance. Does he acknowledge the finding that the families, whom we must remember will be grieving, are not always treated with kindness, respect and sensitivity, which is unacceptable? Does he agree that those handling review cases involving deaths must have compassion and the ability to empathise with families, and that those must be among the qualifications of that job?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely endorse what the hon. Gentleman says. The point is that families and carers are part of the answer because they can help us to understand what went wrong. It is therefore in the interests of all of us to treat them with kindness, respect and dignity.

Point of Order

1.27 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. A fundamental part of our parliamentary democracy is the right of our constituents to raise concerns with their Members of Parliament. My constituent Dawn Knight has raised with me the terrible treatment she received from the Hospital Medical Group following cosmetic surgery. I have raised her case on a number of occasions with Ministers, including on the Floor of the House.

Last week, Dawn Knight and Lorna Kidd, a constituent of the right hon. Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), received solicitors’ letters from Schillings solicitors on behalf of the Hospital Group threatening them with legal action if they discuss their cases with a third party—in other words, including with their Members of Parliament. I know that the right hon. Gentleman has already written to you, Mr Speaker, concerning his constituent. May I ask you to look at this case, because allowing our constituents to raise their concerns with us is fundamental to the way in which we operate?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and indeed for his courtesy in giving me notice of it. I can confirm that I have received the letter to which he refers, and I shall reply to it in due course. Any attempt to impede an hon. Member going about his or her parliamentary business is potentially a contempt, and in such circumstances I would ask the hon. Member to write to me about this matter in the first instance. I hope that that is helpful both to the hon. Gentleman and more widely to the House.
Mutualisation of the Royal Bank of Scotland

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.29 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to transfer the ownership of the Royal Bank of Scotland to its customers and employees; and for connected purposes.

Taxpayers saved the Royal Bank of Scotland; they should now be allowed to own it. It should become a people’s bank that every tax-paying British citizen has the right to be a part-owner of. Making it the Royal Building Society of Scotland would mark a decisive break with the disastrous Fred Goodwin era.

There are new entrants to the banking market and there have been many reforms to banking regulation, many of which have made a difference, but the structural problem in Britain’s banking market—a lack of competition between different types of financial services institutions—is as bad now as it was in 2008, and arguably worse following the banking mergers that the crash precipitated. The problems of 2008 can be traced back, in part, directly to 1992, when the wave of building society demutualisations began. Although only 10 of the 89 societies that existed demutualised, because those 10 were among the largest, they represented about 70% of the mutual sector’s assets.

Before 1992 in the UK, as is still the case in most of the rest of Europe, banking services were provided by financial service providers with a range of ownership structures and, therefore, with different incentives and business ambitions. After 1992, the gradual takeover of most of the big players in the building society world led to a steady decline and deterioration in competition in banking in the UK.

Although many other countries have had serious problems in their banking sector, few have suffered as much as the UK and, crucially, few others have been so dominated by traditional shareholder investor-owned banks. Each of the last two Governments have been wrong to leave in place what is effectively a cartel of the major banks, with just one building society challenging their dominance.

There have been persistent concerns about the level of competition in the banking market and its structure. I am pleased to say that those finally led to the Competition and Markets Authority being called in to investigate. In August this year, it published its retail banking market conclusions. For anyone who is tempted to think that banking is a wholly reformed and properly functioning sector, first by fostering more diversity and secondly by promoting mutuals. The case for mutualising RBS, rather than selling the rest of its shares at some future point on the open market, is partly that it would encourage a more diverse group of big banking businesses, partly that it would enhance the critical mass of the mutual sector and partly that it would accelerate improvements in the culture and practice of RBS itself.

Andrew Haldane of the Bank of England has argued that a more mixed system of different corporate structures is likely to produce a more stable financial system. While there is evidence that building societies offer their customers a better deal, on average, than traditional banks, I am not making the case for mutuals per se, although I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for mutuals. I am making the case for the systemic advantages of a mix of banks and mutuals, which turning RBS into the Royal Building Society of Scotland would deliver. Mutuals, although affected by the downturn, proved more stable than traditional proprietary banks. Given the huge barriers to entry to setting up a new mutual of any significant size in the financial services, it makes sense to explore the mutualising of a mature business, while conserving the remaining mutuals.

As we have had to suspend the sale and reprivatisation of shares in RBS, there is an opportunity to consider an alternative to state or private ownership. After all, no one thinks the Government will get their money back in full from the sale of RBS shares for the foreseeable future. Indeed, the Office for Budget Responsibility is no longer factoring in any sales of RBS shares in this Parliament. Those shares that were sold resulted in a net loss of £1 billion to the taxpayer.
The mutualisation of RBS would not mean that its debt to the taxpayer could not be repaid. A new mutualised Royal Bank of Scotland would need to make annual payments to the Treasury for some time to come. An asset lock for the new Royal Building Society of Scotland would also be needed to ensure that members—that is, customers or employees of the society—would benefit only from their ongoing financial relationship with the business. Crucially, it would be clear up front that membership of the new society could not lead to a demutualisation-style handout, so members would have no incentive other than to see the business stick to its core activities.

The trade sale of RBS shares was to other financial services players. If Goldman Sachs, Citigroup and Morgan Stanley are allowed to continue with that, it will simply reinforce ownership of the big banks by the wealthiest in our country and beyond.

A Royal Building Society of Scotland would be a chance to change the culture fundamentally at one of Britain’s biggest financial players. Above all else, it would inject some competitive energy and dynamism into what is, to all intents and purposes, still a monopoly. Britain’s largest financial players. Above all else, it would inject some competitive energy and dynamism into what is, to all intents and purposes, still a monopoly.

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Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Mr Gareth Thomas, Luciana Berger, Stephen Twigg, Stephen Doughty, Stella Creasy, Geraint Davies, Mr Mark Hendrick, Mr Adrian Bailey, Mike Gapes, Ms Karen Buck, Christina Rees and Mr Steve Baker present the Bill.

Mr Gareth Thomas accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March 2017, and to be printed (Bill 111).

Alienco/Syria: International Action

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

1.39 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered international action to protect civilians in Aleppo and more widely across Syria.

The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), with whom I co-chair the friends of Syria all-party group, joins me in thanking you, Mr Speaker, for granting this emergency debate. We are both concerned that on occasions, motions such as this can appear to be hand-wringing and to focus on the concept that something must be done. We are anxious today to encourage the Government to pursue all avenues and options, as I know they are extremely anxious to do.

The House will be particularly grateful to the Foreign Secretary for responding to the debate himself. On the earlier occasion when you granted an emergency debate on these matters, Mr Speaker, he returned to the House and made his first major speech from the Dispatch Box. I believe his presence signifies the concern of Foreign Office Ministers about the tragedy that is Aleppo today.

I wish to cover three points this afternoon. The first is the current situation in Aleppo. Secondly, I have some specific suggestions for the Government to consider together with our allies, and, thirdly, some observations on how this crisis could develop in 2017 and the action that the international community should take.

I start with the position on the ground today. We are able to monitor what is going through Twitter and other social media to some extent, but in particular, the reports of the United Nations and its agencies, and of the International Committee of the Red Cross, are likely to be extremely accurate. They have reported over lunchtime that there is clear evidence of civilians being executed—shot on the spot. There are dead bodies in the street that cannot be reached because of gunfire. In the last couple of hours, we have heard that probably more than 100 children who are unaccompanied or separated from their families are trapped in a building in east Aleppo and under heavy fire.

We learn from totally credible independent sources inside Aleppo that all the hospitals have been deliberately destroyed with barrel bombs and bunker-busting bombs, and that in case the people in those hospitals were not destroyed by those munitions, cluster munitions, which are anti-personnel munitions, have also been used. There are pop-up clinics in underground locations, which are suffering nightmare conditions, with people lying on the floor and pools of blood everywhere. Doctors and nurses are wearing boots because there is so much blood on the floor, and casualties are moved in and out as fast as they possibly can be because there are grave dangers to them from being in those locations. The ambulances of the White Helmets have been specifically targeted, and there is now no fuel available for them.

In the mid-afternoon yesterday, a 10 km by 10 km zone was the centre of the fighting in Aleppo. It is contracting, and at 10 o’clock this morning it was probably less than half that size. There are approximately 150,000 civilians crammed into that area, and very large numbers of them are children. Large numbers are stranded
in the open and looking for shelter. The only food available is dates and bulgur wheat. Water has run out, and there is no electricity. Last night, people were flooding into that enclave. As I have said, there are credible reports of executions and the removal of groups of adult males.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman paints an absolutely grim picture of the current situation in Aleppo. Two years ago, I travelled to Srebrenica with the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). We visited an exhibition in Sarajevo of pictures from Srebrenica and pictures from Syria, and they were indistinguishable. When we hear of summary executions, disappearances of men and boys, unmarked graves and the types of atrocities that the right hon. Gentleman is describing, does he not believe that we risk this being the Srebrenica of our generation?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, which I will come to directly.

The terrified civilians in Aleppo are of course sophisticated, educated people from what was one of the great cities of the world. With 2 million people, it is 6,000 years old and has treasured Islamic civilisation and artefacts within it. A senior Aleppo resident, terrified, said this morning:

“The human corridor needs to happen. If the British Government is serious about fighting terror, they can’t ignore state terror. Doing so creates so many more enemies and if they offer but empty words, nobody will ever believe them in future.”

Ten years ago, this country, along with the entire international community, embraced the responsibility to protect, a doctrine that said that nation states great and small would not allow Srebrenicas, Rwandas and other appalling events such as those in Darfur to take place again. That responsibility was signed up to with great fanfare and embraced by all the international community, great and small. Yet here we are today witnessing—complicit in—what is happening to tens of thousands of Syrians in Aleppo.

That is the situation today. I come to my second point, which is to put specific actions to the Government, which I know they will wish to consider. First, there is an urgent need for humanitarian teams to be deployed and given unfettered access to Aleppo once Government forces there are in control. That is essential if we are to avoid the same circumstances as Srebrenica—the precise point that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) has just made. There is a very serious danger, from the position I have described, that such events are already taking place, so it is essential that those teams are deployed.

We need to get food, medicine, fuel and medical services into east Aleppo immediately. We also need to have independent humanitarian eyes and ears on the ground, not only to give confidence to terrified civilians—who, I remind the House, are caught out in the open in temperatures that are predicted to fall below minus 4°tonight—but to avoid possibly false allegations of war crimes and breaches of international humanitarian law by Government forces and their military associates. It is not easy to see why Russia and Syria would wish to resist that, unless they do not wish the world to know or see the actions that they are now taking in Aleppo.

The second action that I hope the Government will evaluate and support is organising the evacuation to comparative safety, in United Nations buses and lorries, under a white flag and in a permissive environment, of the people who are wounded or have been caught up in this terrible catastrophe. It is clear that the United Nations has the capacity, with available vehicles, to move north up to the Castello road and then west to Bab al-Hawa, near Reyhanli, on the border, which Clare Short, the distinguished former International Development Secretary, and I visited earlier this year. There are hospitals in Bab al-Hawa, and there are significant refugee facilities on the Syrian side of the border. They are easily resupplied via the Reyhanli crossing by international humanitarian actors, and that route out of the nightmare of eastern Aleppo should be made available as fast as possible.

Britain is in a pivotal position at the United Nations to try to convene an acceptance that that action should be taken. We are hugely respected on humanitarian matters at the UN, Matthew Rycroft, the permanent representative to the UN5 on the Security Council, is extremely effective in what he does. The current National Security Adviser, Mark Lyall Grant, a key UN5 operative for many years, has great convening power, and there are senior UK officials at the United Nations. The head of the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Stephen O’Brien, who worked with me at the Department for International Development, plays a pivotal role. The British foreign service is respected and admired around the world, and, in supporting Staffan de Mistura and Jan Egeland, has an absolutely pivotal role to play in trying to convene the consensus that is now urgently required.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making a powerful and important speech. Does he think the Syrian regime would allow those very necessary humanitarian interventions without counter-attack and disaster?

Mr Mitchell: Yes, I believe that if the Russians could be persuaded at this point that they have nothing to lose from allowing international humanitarian actors into Aleppo, the Syrians would agree. If they do not, the world must ask why they wish to hide from purely humanitarian action.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point about the importance of international pressure. He will have seen as we all did the grotesque story on the front of the Morning Star suggesting that what is happening is the “liberation of Aleppo”. While such scandalous propaganda on behalf of Russia is being put about within the UK, is it not all the more important that we have that international pressure so that we open the eyes of everyone in the world to what is happening?

Mr Mitchell: I confess to the hon. Gentleman that the Morning Star is not on my morning reading list. In view of what he has just said, I am most unlikely to add it.

Will the Foreign Secretary commit today to Britain’s using every sinew of the immensely impressive diplomatic machine I described to secure a consensus on those two actions in these last moments for Aleppo?
Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I am sorry I cannot stay for the whole debate—there is a concurrent meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I agree with my right hon. Friend about the efforts to relieve the situation in Aleppo, but a year ago 20 nations—the International Syria Support Group—sat around a table and produced an agreement on the future of Syria. Does he agree that our efforts must also return to the politics of getting the whole international community into the same place on the future of Syria?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is right that the support group has proved to be a cumbersome and not entirely effective mechanism, but his central point is absolutely correct.

I come to my third and final point, which is on the House looking to the future. What can we do as part of the international community to bring the catastrophe that has engulfed the Syrian people to an end? By an incredibly unfortunate sequence of events, the international community has so far been completely unable to help. The United Nations has been hobbled by Russian actions, using the veto, which it has the privilege to use on the Security Council, to shield itself from criticism and to stop international action on Syria.

The Kofi Annan plan originally put forward by the UN was, in my view, tragically and wrongly rejected by the American Government. The Russians in their turn have shredded a rules-based system, which will have cataclysmic effects on international law, international humanitarian law and international human rights. The Americans have been absent. Crucially, President Obama made it clear that, were chemical weapons to be used, it would cross a red line and America would take action. Chemical weapons were used and no action was taken by the Americans.

This House, in my view, was ill-advised to reject the former Prime Minister’s motion in August 2013 for British action. I hope the Government keep an open mind about putting another resolution before the House, as is necessary.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for the powerful case he is making and the leadership he is demonstrating, but would he concede that the 2013 motion was not on a comprehensive plan to bring peace, and that if a motion is brought before the House, it should be on a comprehensive, UN-backed plan to deliver peace and not on such a narrow issue?

Mr Mitchell: I hope that, if there is a chance for Britain, with its pivotal role at the United Nations, to support a UN-backed force, if necessary with military action, Britain will very seriously consider it, and that such a proposition will be put before the House of Commons.

I was listing the unfortunate coincidence of events that has hobbled the international community, the fourth of which is that the Arab states in the region are irredeemably split on what should happen in Syria. Europe has become dysfunctional, facing inwards and not looking outwards, and focused on the symptoms of the problem—the refugees—and not on the causes. A resurgent Russia is pursuing its interests. The House should understand Russia’s interests and respect them, even as her actions are rightly condemned, and as we confront it when it breaches humanitarian law, as it has undoubtedly done in Aleppo.

There are only two ways in which this catastrophe will end. There will either be a military victory or there will be a negotiation. There will not be a military victory, so at some point there will be a negotiation and ceasefire to enable bitterly antagonistic foes to negotiate. When that time comes, Britain has the experience, the connections, the funds and the expertise to assist. The great powers must support that negotiation, however difficult it is, and put pressure on the regional powers to do the same. It is essential that we provide, through our position at the UN, the strongest possible diplomatic and strategic support to that process.

There will come a moment, too, when President-elect Trump and President Putin discuss these matters. As is widely recognised, there are indications that the two men can do business. I hope that the United States lifts its veto on Assad being part of any negotiations—Assad is part of the problem, and therefore by definition part of the solution—and that Russia uses its power to stop the conflict on the ground while both combine to defeat ISIL.

Finally, I ask the Foreign Secretary: will he intensify the efforts of his office to collect evidence, especially now, of breaches of international humanitarian law and war crimes, so that individuals as well as states, no matter how long it takes, can be held to account one day for what they have done?

1.57 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing this emergency debate. I compliment the right hon. Gentleman for speaking with his customary force and authority, and for the way in which he has spoken up for the people of Aleppo persistently. Labour Members will always remember that he took up Labour’s fight to meet the 0.7% aid target after he became International Development Secretary in 2010. If, following the Chancellor’s words yesterday, we need to resume that fight in the coming years, I am sure that the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield will be on our side again.

Since our previous emergency debate on Aleppo just over two months ago, every worst prediction that was made that day has happened. We all warned that the grotesque war crimes being committed by Russia and the Assad regime would only intensify, and so it proved. We all warned of the increasing humanitarian crisis, with thousands of civilians still trapped in Aleppo, desperately short of food, water, medical supplies and shelter. That crisis has only got worse. Finally, we all warned that, if nothing changed, eastern Aleppo would be destroyed by Christmas, and that is exactly what is coming to pass.

It was depressing to read in recent days the accounts of the talks that have taken place in Washington—they are said to have been going on for months—about the technical options for making airdrops of humanitarian supplies into Aleppo. The subject was raised recently in the House by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South. According to The Guardian, the last meeting on the subject of airdrops collapsed because of fears that, by the time any airdrop took place, “there would be no one...left to save”.

Finally, I ask the Foreign Secretary: will he intensify the efforts of his office to collect evidence, especially now of breaches of international humanitarian law and war crimes, so that individuals as well as states, no matter how long it takes, can be held to account one day for what they have done?
It was equally depressing and chastening to read the text sent yesterday by a doctor in eastern Aleppo, which he described as his “farewell message”. He wrote:

“Remember that there was once a city called Aleppo that the world erased from...history”.

Although we all condemn Russia and Assad for their actions in eastern Aleppo—we must ensure that one day they are held to account—and we equally condemn Iran and Hezbollah for the role that they have played in the massacre, we must remember the words of that doctor, who blamed not only those directly responsible for destroying his city, but the world as a whole for allowing it to happen. This has been a global collective failure every bit as great as Srebrenica. On that point, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty).

What do we do now? I believe that the answer boils down to four points. First, we must take every diplomatic step to press Russia and Iran to allow safe passage from eastern Aleppo, not just for the remaining fighters and their families, but for medical professionals, journalists and others. Many will have watched the extremely moving “Inside Aleppo” films on Channel 4. They were filmed by a 25-year-old mother and Aleppo citizen—not a camera woman or a journalist—who is married to a doctor whose professional duties have kept them in the city, even after many of the other civilians have fled. It is difficult to imagine the terror that they feel, but we have read their messages for ourselves.

We must make it clear to Russia and Iran that those civilians must be given safe passage from the city or be protected if they remain. I have been told by several sources, including journalists, the UN and the Red Cross, that there is a makeshift building—some might call it the last remaining hospital; others might say that it is simply a building that people have moved into in the last few days—inside which hundreds of children and injured people and 110 medical staff are trapped. Following negotiations with the Russians and the Syrian Government, the Russians have said that while the fighters and their families will be allowed to leave, the so-called civilians and activists will not. The “activists” they refer to are medical staff. Why would medical staff not be allowed to leave? According to the Russians, they must remain in the city, presumably to face the shelling. They presumably have a high chance of being massacred by the regime or at the very least detained. How can it be that men with guns can leave eastern Aleppo, but men with stethoscopes cannot?

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): It might be that the men with guns have a high chance of being killed in some future conflict, whereas the citizen journalists and humanitarian doctors and nurses to whom my hon. Friend refers would be credible witnesses in any future criminal proceedings, and Russia and Syria have every incentive to make sure that their evidence is never given to the world.

Emily Thornberry: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point that, in many ways, echoes what was said earlier about the importance of allowing aid workers and independent people into the area to bear witness to what is going on.

Secondly, once the fighting in Aleppo has ended—an end might well come very soon—how will we get humanitarian relief to the citizens still in eastern Aleppo and to those who have fled elsewhere, particularly as the temperatures begin to plummet and the need for shelter and blankets becomes as great as the need for food, water and medical supplies? As I have said, there is also a need for witnesses to the aftermath. If Russia and Assad continue to block road convoys into the area, surely the Government must finally accept that we have reached the point of last resort—that point at which the previous Foreign Secretary promised that airdrops would be used. If we fear that manned flights might be too dangerous, as does the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood)—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood) indicated dissent.

Emily Thornberry: The Minister sits and shakes his head, but if we fear that such flights might be too dangerous, the Government must consider using unmanned drones or GPS-guided parachutes.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am really concerned about the idea that we might send our aircraft into airspace that is contested and hostile. As I know, they fly low to drop the aid, and they can be taken out by ground fire, not just missiles. I suggest that all those people who wish this to happen sign their names and perhaps travel on the RAF aircraft, because the action would be extremely dangerous.

Emily Thornberry: There is a live debate about this, which is why I also pray in aid solutions such as unmanned drones or GPS-guided parachutes, which can carry much more than unmanned drones. We know that the Government are actively considering all these proposals. If airdrops are not the answer to delivering humanitarian aid, I hope that the Foreign Secretary will tell us what is, because inaction is simply not an option.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate those who have secured this debate. A UN spokesperson stated this morning that there had been a “complete meltdown of humanity” in Aleppo. If that does not mean that we have reached the point of last resort, does my hon. Friend, like me, want to hear from the Foreign Secretary exactly what that point would be?

Emily Thornberry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; I could not have put it better myself.

Thirdly, once Aleppo has fallen, attention will at some point turn to Raqqa and other cities where Daesh is currently in control or attempting to take control. Civilians are trapped in those cities as well, and they will be just as vulnerable as the civilians in Aleppo to bombardment, the use of chemical weapons and the humanitarian effects of any siege. To what extent, if at all, will there be co-operation with Russia, Iran and pro-Government forces, if and when their attention turns to fighting Daesh? If the answer is none, how will we stop Raqqa and other cities turning into repeats of Aleppo?
Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend refers to other cities in Syria. Is it not clear that the Assad regime and the Russians have focused all their resources on destroying eastern Aleppo and allowed ISIL/Daesh to retake Palmyra? Does that not show their real priorities?

Emily Thornberry: In some ways, that takes me to my fourth and final point. The impending fall of Aleppo must raise the question: what exactly is the Government’s current thinking about Syria? Increasingly across the country, we are seeing what the Foreign Secretary has called moderate rebel groups either defeated by pro-Assad forces or signing truce agreements with them. It has been claimed that more than 1,000 such local truce agreements are now in place. Do the Government believe that the moderate rebellion is still taking place or has any chance of succeeding? If not, what endgame are the Government now working towards?

In September, the Defence Committee published its report on the Government’s military strategy in Syria and concluded that the goal of creating new leadership in Syria that was “neither authoritarian and repressive, on the one hand, nor Islamist and extreme, on the other” was too ambitious to be achieved “by military means alone”. That remains a wise judgment, yet the Government seem to be even further away than they were in September from squaring this particular circle.

These are desperately dark and terrifying hours for the people of Aleppo. They are hours of shame and disgrace for the Governments of Syria, Russia and Iran, who have perpetuated this vicious assault, and they should be hours of deep sorrow and reflection for every international institution and Government who failed to stop it happening and did not do enough to help the people of Aleppo while there was still time. Even now, there are still things that we can do. There are still important lessons to learn and important questions for the Government to answer about where we go from here. I hope that the Foreign Secretary will take this opportunity to answer some of those questions today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We will begin with an eight-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

2.8 pm

Mr George Osborne (Tatton) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on speaking with such passion and compassion for the citizens of Aleppo, and on bringing to bear his experience as one of the country’s outstanding International Development Secretaries. I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate; it is good to see my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary here to bear his experience as one of the country’s outstanding compassion for the citizens of Aleppo, and on bringing ISIL/Daesh to retake Palmyra? Does that not show their real priorities?

The whole concept of an emergency debate suggests that this tragedy has somehow come upon us out of the blue and that there is an almost natural aspect to it, but that is not the case. The Syrian civil war has been waged since 2011, so this is something that we could have foreseen and done something about. We are deceiving ourselves in this Parliament if we believe that we have no responsibility for what has happened in Syria. The tragedy in Aleppo did not come out of a vacuum; it was created by a vacuum—a vacuum of western leadership, including American and British leadership. I take responsibility, as someone who sat on the National Security Council throughout those years, and Parliament should also take its responsibility because of what it prevented being done.

There were multiple opportunities to intervene. In 2012, David Petraeus, the head of the CIA, devised a plan for a much more aggressive intervention in Syria, providing lethal support to what was then clearly a moderate opposition in the Free Syrian Army. That approach was rejected. Britain provided support for flak jackets, medical kits and so forth, but it was clear throughout 2012 and 2013 that there was not a parliamentary majority in this House for providing lethal support to that opposition so that they could shoot down helicopters and aircraft, and fire back with sophisticated weaponry.

In 2013, of course, this House of Commons took a decision not to back a Government motion to authorise airstrikes when Assad used chemical weapons, breaking a 100-year-old taboo—we established it in the west and it survived the second world war—that you do not use chemical weapons, as well as crossing a red line that the President of the United States had established.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman think that such lethal force would have overcome the Iranians, the Russians and Assad? Does he really think that if we had provided more munitions, he really think that if we had provided more munitions, this was a winnable war?

Mr Osborne: On the narrow point, in August 2013, we were responding to the use of chemical weapons and providing airstrikes as a demonstration that the use of those weapons was completely unacceptable and that a red line had been crossed—and, indeed, that the west had established that red line. Of course, once this House of Commons took its decision, I believe it did have an impact on American politics. We cannot have it both ways—we cannot debate issues such as Syria and then think that our decisions have no impact on the rest of the world. I think that that did cause a delay in the American Administration’s actions and did cause Congress to get cold feet.

This is where I want to begin to draw my remarks to a close, because I know many Members want to speak. The last time I spoke from the Back Benches was in 2003, from the Opposition Benches, when we were debating intervention in Iraq. We all know the price of intervention. My political generation knows the price of intervention: the incredibly brave servicemen and women risking their lives as doctors and White Helmet workers in that war zone. I support everything that has been said about what we need to do to get aid into Aleppo, or to provide some kind of ceasefire so that civilians can get out of Aleppo.

We should not, however, lose sight of the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons. It is not just chemical weapons. Let me quote an incredible article in the Daily Star—the “Morning Star”—by my constituent Graham Jones, in which he says:

Days after chemical weapons and barrel bombs killed hundreds of civilians, the regime began using the potent nerve gas sarin, but there is no sympathy for the victims. President Bashar al-Assad and his cronies say we are fighting a “conventional war”. Many civilians, including children and women, were killed. We have to put a stop to it...
who gave their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan; the thousands of civilians who died in those conflicts; the cost to taxpayers in this country; the chaos that inevitably follows when there is intervention in a country; and, of course, the division in our society, our families and our communities.

I believe, however, that we have come to a point where it is impossible to intervene anywhere—we lack the political will, as the west, to intervene. I nevertheless have some hope for what might come out from this terrible tragedy in Syria, which is that we are beginning to learn the price of not intervening. We did not intervene in Syria, and tens of thousands of people have been killed as a result while millions of refugees have been sent from their homes across the world. We have allowed a terrorist state to emerge in the form of ISIS, which we are now trying to defeat. Key allies such as Lebanon and Jordan are destabilised, and the refugee crisis has transformed the politics of Europe, allowing fascism to rise in eastern Europe and creating extremist parties in western Europe. For the first time since Henry Kissinger kicked it out of the middle east in the 1970s, Russia is back as the decisive player in that region. That is the price of not intervening.

Let us have our debate, and let us do everything that we can to help the civilians of Aleppo. Let us hope that the new American Administration and the new Secretary of State work with the Russians to get the ceasefire, but let us be clear now that if we do not shape the world, we will be shaped by it.

2.15 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank those Members who have already spoken and made remarks that I agree with. It is an honour to speak after the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne). I have vigorously opposed so many times in this House everything that he has put to us. Today, I respect his very thoughtful and important contribution.

I rise today with one purpose, which is to persuade the Foreign Secretary that if he chooses to listen to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and take the action that he suggested, he will do so with wide support across this House. Overnight, we have seen reports of the fresh hell that Aleppo has become. We hear this message from the White Helmets:

“100,000+ civilians are packed”,
as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield said,

“into a tiny area. Bombing and shelling relentless. Casualties unimaginable. Bodies lie where they fell.”

Last night, we heard the final distress call. Today, we decide whether to answer.

The situation in Syria is so dire and the need so urgent that we must not waste further time in deliberation and delay. It is as simple as this: civilians in Syria cannot be left to the mercy of Assad. Ban Ki-moon was very clear in his message yesterday that we all have an obligation

“to protect civilians and abide by international humanitarian and human rights law.”

He went on:

“This is particularly the responsibility of the Syrian government and its allies.”

Like the Secretary-General of the UN, we here all know what President Assad and his allies are doing to the people of Aleppo—and the Government know it, too. A letter of condemnation signed by our Prime Minister last week described the bombing of hospitals and children being gassed. It described these acts as war crimes. These are strong words, but strong words will not rescue a single child while Assad continues to drop bombs on their heads. The Prime Minister rightly condemns the Russians for their “refusal to engage in serious peace talks”, but I say it is time for our Government also to rethink their efforts.

As has been said, we can now clearly see the consequences of our inaction. We have asked our Government to step forward with a strategy to protect civilians. Without this, we can see the consequences: so many bodies that the White Helmets can no longer count them, let alone mount a rescue. So our inaction must now become action, which is why, 18 days ago, when I asked Members of this House from all parties to sign a letter to the Prime Minister in support of getting aid to Syrians—by air, if necessary, as a last resort—I was unsurprised, though very glad, that within one day, 100 Members had agreed to put their names to such a request. Very quickly, that number had risen to over 200 and is now 221 if we count all parliamentarians—Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Scottish nationalist, Social Democratic and Labour party, Democratic Unionist party, Plaid, Green; Mr Speaker, who cares what party we are today? Human beings are being slaughtered without mercy, and I say, never mind party policy; that is a sin against nature itself.

So what should the Government do? We know that Russia will continue to frustrate the UN process by using its veto to protect Assad. Strongly worded letters from our Prime Minister and others are worth nothing if we are not prepared to back them up with actual action. First, we need to get the vulnerable out of there. Children, medics, the injured and the disabled urgently need safe passage to somewhere with shelter, food and basic medical facilities.

Secondly, as 221 parliamentarians are begging the Government: get aid in—in by whatever means we can. The reality in front of our eyes is this: even to save a single life, aid is required. We know it is there, and even at this late stage we must do what we can to get it to people.

Thirdly, we must protect those left behind. The Government must press with the full capacity of the British legal profession for UN monitoring, or even just British monitoring, of the atrocities now being committed. If we offer Syrian civilians so very little, the least we can do is promise that, however long it takes, Assad will see justice.

We have all heard the Government’s usual lines on this: they say they are doing all they can, they are keeping their options open, and nothing is off the table. That is not good enough. We are calling on the Government to put something on the table. The reality is that by delaying we are not keeping our options open; we are closing them off. Every day we miss a chance to do what is right.

I am sure that the Government will put out another press release telling us how tragic the fall of Aleppo is, but then Assad will move on, maybe to Idlib or somewhere else, and then somewhere else, and the whole thing will play out again; and we will see more bombed-out hospitals, more dead children, more war crimes, and no doubt more well-written press releases from Governments.
So I have two final questions today. First, will the Foreign Secretary support the call of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield for an immediate ceasefire to evacuate the children and medical staff still trapped in the rubble of east Aleppo? Will the Government help make that happen, yes or no? Will they go further and do everything possible to secure a more permanent ceasefire and humanitarian access in Aleppo?

The Foreign Secretary knows that the support is here in this House for airdrops of aid if the Government give it their backing. As I have said, more than 200 hon. Members have signed a letter in support of that; the only obstacle is the question of action from the Government. If that is the wrong option and we need another way to open humanitarian corridors, all I ask is for the Foreign Secretary to come back to this House with a strategy to protect civilians.

Secondly, will the Foreign Secretary commit here and now that the Government will not stand by as the Syrian regime moves on to the next city, because does anybody seriously believe that if we allow Assad to have his way now, he is going to stop?

I want to finish by reminding the Foreign Secretary that, alongside the bombs and the gas, the Assad regime has been dropping propaganda leaflets into eastern Aleppo in recent weeks. These leaflets tell the people there that the world has abandoned them and there is no hope. It is up to us to show that that propaganda is a lie. We must show the desperate people of Syria that there are still people in this world who have not forgotten them—people who will honour the commitments we have made in international law and will stand with them against barbarism.

Aleppo may have just hours left, but there are still souls alive in Syria who we can help. If we do nothing—if we just stand by and watch—thousands more people in Syria will die in agony, and millions in Britain will live with the shame of our inaction.

The Foreign Secretary sits on the Treasury Bench. For more than six years, I have sat here on the Opposition Benches with my Labour friends, and I am deeply proud of my party. Yet I have to tell the Foreign Secretary that if he chooses to act—if he chooses to offer a hand in friendship to people in Syria—there will be no Front Benches or Back Benches, no Government Benches and Opposition Benches; there will simply be all of us here—British citizens, representing the British people, wanting him to act, not in the worst of our country’s traditions, but in our best, and wanting him, on behalf of all of us, and for the sake of those in Syria who cannot escape and who desperately need safety, in our name and for them, begging him, to lead.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The time limit on Back-Bench speeches will for now be reduced to six minutes.

2.23 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I would very much like to see a humanitarian corridor going to eastern Aleppo, but may I talk about the practical requirements needed to establish such a route, and to get people to safety without anyone fighting to achieve it? I will give a few thoughts based on my experience of frequently having had to do that job in the 1990s.

Everyone present knows that this would be a very difficult operation and would require, at least, Syrian Government and Russian approval. Clearly the route must be free from air and ground attack. Without this, establishing a safe route into and out of Aleppo would be impossible. That is the first, and probably most vital, prerequisite for achieving success, and I suppose our diplomats are working overtime on such matters as I speak.

I also take it as a given that this operation would be done under the United Nations flag. Of course, therefore, every vehicle would be emblazoned with the UN cypher, and be operating under the moral authority of the world’s forum, but in truth, forces fighting on the ground may not be under effective control of even their own side. In such circumstances, small fighting groups often act independently and, if so, they could cause huge loss of life.

In Bosnia I used small teams led by a liaison officer to prove that we could use routes before allowing convoys to go down them. This was dangerous work and it was a job that involved convincing every commander of every roadblock that it was to be open. I have to say that if we were to suggest such a thing, we may well have to send our officers on the ground to do it. I would support that.

Of course there also has to be a plan for the worst case when things go wrong. In Bosnia I could send my own troops in, but we cannot send troops into Syria. These convoys would be on their own, and they would be dependent on Syrian military and militia goodwill, and of course that of the Russians.

If we are successful and get a humanitarian convoy out of Aleppo to a place of safety, we will be responsible for the people in that convoy. We have heard already today of people being “executed.” I hate that word; they are murdered. Execution is a judicial process; those people have been murdered. We would have responsibility for ensuring these people’s safety.

Establishing a safe humanitarian corridor can be done, given determination and the will and consent of belligerents. We cannot fight our way in—well, we could if we were up to it, but we are not—but let me be clear: this will not be easy and it requires a huge number of preconditions to be met.

Finally, may I remind this House that if Members suggest that we should lead humanitarian convoys into Aleppo, we will bear responsibility for whatever happens, good or bad?

2.27 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The shadow Foreign Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), said that what is happening in Syria shames the Assad regime, Iran and Russia; it shames all of us in this House and every political party in this country. It shames the democratic world, the United States, and the United Nations, and if we do not do anything about it—let us not kid ourselves that Assad will stop here; Idlib will be next—that will be the end of the rules-based global order we thought we
had achieved after the horrors of Srebrenica, with all the grave consequences that will entail for our future peace and security.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Bradshaw: I will not give way for the moment.

There have been so many missed opportunities. As the former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), said in his excellent speech, many people across the world have been calling for action against Assad since he started slaughtering his own people five years ago. In August 2013, after the international outrage at his use of chemical weapons, we had the chance, but we blew it; the Conservatives blew it, we blew it—every political party in this House blew it. The former Chancellor was absolutely right when he said that that had a direct impact on what the United States did then, with President Obama fatally withdrawing from the red line he had drawn on the use of chemical weapons, with absolutely horrendous consequences, not just now in Syria, but for the future of our world to come.

At any stage since that calamity, the Government could have come back to this House with proposals for safe areas, no-fly zones and, most recently, aid drops, but they did not. Just two weeks ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury made it quite clear that we would support airdrops. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), hid behind the excuse of not having parliamentary authority, but he did not even seek it, which has been a pattern of this Government over the past few years. As a desperate aid worker told the BBC yesterday, it might now be too late.

We now have the disgusting spectacle of a combination of far right and far left from around the world, united only in their contempt for democracy and human rights, celebrating what they call a “liberation”. Why do we constantly forget the lessons of appeasement, whether from the 1930s or more recently from the Balkans? Statements on Syria from Conservative Ministers have sounded just like the ones I remember from when they were dealing—or not dealing—with Milosevic as he rampaged through Bosnia. When will we understand that dictators such as Assad and Putin only respect strength and the credible threat or use of force? When will we realise that Russia’s strategy is to weaken and divide the free world and that driving the biggest refugee flows into Europe since world war two is a deliberate part of that plan? When will we admit that Putin is already achieving what he cannot achieve militarily through cyber-warfare and propaganda?

The motion that we are debating is welcome, but it is pathetic. It refers to the House considering “international action” in Aleppo. There will no international action, because there is no political will, either here or in the other countries where such will is necessary.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend as anxious as I am? With Putin and Russia linked to interference in the American election, with the bombing of Syria leading to a refugee crisis in Europe and with many central European countries looking inward, like we are, Putin’s expansionist tendencies and desire for a warm port should make the Foreign Secretary think carefully about the actions from this point on forwards.

Mr Bradshaw: I completely agree. We have not even begun to wake up to Russia’s cyber-warfare. Its interference in the American presidential elections is now proven. It probably interfered in our own referendum—we do not have the evidence for that yet, but it is highly probable. It will certainly be involved in the French presidential election. There are already serious concerns in the German secret service that Russia is already interfering in the upcoming elections. We have to wake up to this, but when?

Finally, the tragedy today is the tragedy of the benighted people of Aleppo issuing desperate, and probably futile, last-minute appeals for help to the outside world. The tragedy tomorrow will be all of ours for failing to stop this happening and for the consequences. Shame on us.
The world is getting smaller by the day and we must play our part in it. We must decide what that part is and what duty we owe to humanity. That duty now looks to be two things. First, as we have heard today, we must get people out immediately. Medics, children, mums—citizens—are trapped and we have to evacuate them as soon as possible. We must get humanitarian aid in as a matter of emergency. We have to urge international action to call an immediate ceasefire. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said, we must identify the war crimes and bring people to account. Secondly, we must pledge never again to turn our backs, never again to be ground down or put off by the length or difficulty of the struggle, never to give in to moral failure. We must pledge never to be so determinedly full of doubt, never to give up on our side of the world. Never again to be ground down or put off by the length or difficulty of the struggle, never to give in to moral failure. We must pledge never to be so determinedly full of doubt, never to give up on our side of the world.

Secondly, we must pledge never again to turn our backs, never again to be ground down or put off by the length or difficulty of the struggle, never to give in to moral failure. We must pledge never to be so determinedly full of doubt, never to give up on our side of the world. Never again to be ground down or put off by the length or difficulty of the struggle, never to give in to moral failure. We must pledge never to be so determinedly full of doubt, never to give up on our side of the world.

We then saw the Russian move into the country, with no UN mandate and no request, yet we allowed it to happen. President Obama said, “Oh well, they’ll come to regret that.” The Russians are not regretting it, because they have been able to show through that and through the highly discriminate slaughter—I was going to say indiscriminate, but it is not—they are perpetrating about the need for justice, bringing people to account and to courts, but the Russians do not respect this. There is no way that they are going to give up their soldiers. Where will this happen next? Will it be a NATO battle? Will it be a war of the United Nations? Yes, as the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) suggested, we are now seeing the irretrievable breakdown of the United Nations.

There is no way that they are going to give up their soldiers. Where will this happen next? Will it be a NATO battle? Will it be a war of the United Nations? Yes, as the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) suggested, we are now seeing the irretrievable breakdown of the United Nations.
I understand that the Prime Minister is focused on the UK’s exit from the European Union, and rightly so, but this is not a world where we can have one focus and we can leave the difficult decisions beyond the European borders to other people. With genuine respect to the Foreign Secretary, I say that I have seen his understanding on these issues and I have seen him nodding along, but at the moment we have understanding without the capacity to act. So I implore not simply him, but the Prime Minister to look up at what is happening, to understand the role of leadership that she has in this country and on the world stage, and to let us restore a sense of dignity, rules and consequence to the global order.

2.43 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): As I stand here speaking to the House, I feel humbled but wracked with guilt: guilt that tonight I get to go home and kiss my children, while Syrian parents are burying theirs; and guilt that I am not on the front line with my medical colleagues from the Red Cross, whom I stood with for many years, shoulder to shoulder, in many a humanitarian crisis. Those colleagues are pulling bodies out of wreckage, at certain risk of murder. They are desperately fighting to save lives, without resources, using rags to stop bleeding and with eyes streaming from chlorine gas. I have guilt when I ask myself whether in Britain we on these Benches have done enough for the innocent people of Syria and I cannot put my hand on my heart and say that we have.

My guilt is tempered only by the hope that today my voice, along with those of colleagues from both sides of the House, may be heard and action will be taken. I have said it before and I will say it again: the sound of a voice, along with those of colleagues from both sides of the Chamber, may be nothing. But the words we speak to each other in the Privy Council or the Cabinet, may be the only voice that the world will hear. It is a language that we are not hearing here in this Chamber. Why have we not heard it? Why do we sit here in the twilight of our own lives, will we be able to look at ourselves in the mirror, in the privacy of our own minds, and know we really did all we could? Our choice is simple: will we be governed by fear or will we be led by our conscience?

2.48 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I spoke earlier of my experience visiting Sarajevo and Srebrenica two years ago and of the exhibition that I saw, but one thing that will never leave me was entering a musty room in a mortuary where bags full of bodies and skeletons were still being examined 20 years after that crisis. These were people whose graves had been disinterred and attempts had been made to hide the evidence, and their families were still not able to get closure on the atrocities committed at that time, when the world stood by. When I hear the stories of men and boys being disappeared, of summary executions, of mass graves and of attempts to hide the evidence and to kill those who were witnessing the evidence, I have all the same fears that we will be looking in one of those mortuaries 20 years from now, wondering just what on earth we did.

That leads me to reflect on the decisions that we in this House have made. I have to reflect on whether the decision I took in 2013, with other people in this House, was the right one. I sat through that entire debate, and I did not feel that the Government came forward with a comprehensive plan or that they had clarity about where they were going, but I have to accept that our decision may well have been wrong.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) that the real question was: why did we not act in 2011? Why did we not act right at the beginning of this conflict? Why were we trying to make decisions when already hundreds of thousands of lives had been lost and when already this conflict had spiralled out of control? We have to look at not just one decision, but the collectivity of the decisions that we took over time.

Toby Perkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and for the contribution that he is making. I have felt incredibly proud to listen to many of the speeches that colleagues have made during this debate. I hope and pray that the actions that follow this debate are as great as the speeches. Once this two-hour debate is finished, we will have a five-hour debate on the Neighbourhood Planning Bill. Does he, like me, have a sense of how ludicrous we will look when we are discussing that?

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely. I also fear that many will ask where the rest of the House is today. Where is the Prime Minister? Where is the Leader of the Opposition?
have been attacked in the past, so what can we do to cover for UN aid convoys leaving Aleppo? UN convoys
the Foreign Secretary is saying that we cannot do airdrops, but we need the agreement of Russia and others. If
the aid workers and those others who are trapped? The make this appeal to the Foreign Secretary: what are we
take such action we will see the breakdown of all those when the Security Council fails? I fear that if we do not
Why are we not at the forefront of leading those efforts used before, and Canada has been pushing it this week.
The “Uniting for Peace” resolution process has been there are other means by which we can authorise action.
talk about the failures of the UN Security Council, but efforts of other countries in the United Nations. We
about Russia is deeply worrying and should concern us
sanctions issue?
I wonder why we have not done more to support the efforts of other countries in the United Nations. We
talk about the failures of the UN Security Council, but there are other means by which we can authorise action.
The “Uniting for Peace” resolution process has been used before, and Canada has been pushing it this week.
The General Assembly took a vote and made a decision. Why are we not at the forefront of leading those efforts when the Security Council fails? I fear that if we do not take such action we will see the breakdown of all those systems of international agreement.
Fundamentally, we can make a difference today. I make this appeal to the Foreign Secretary: what are we doing to secure a ceasefire, even a ceasefire of a few hours, to get out the injured, the women and children, the aid workers and those others who are trapped? The UN is there and ready to assist. It can get the people out, but we need the agreement of Russia and others. If the Foreign Secretary is saying that we cannot do airdrops, what can we do with our military assets to provide air cover for UN aid convoys leaving Aleppo? UN convoys have been attacked in the past, so what can we do to provide the assurance that they will not be attacked leaving the scene of this atrocity? What can we do to provide access for neutral humanitarian monitors—those people from the International Committee of the Red Cross and other organisations—to ensure that the evidence is not destroyed and that those who are responsible for these atrocities cannot cover up what they are doing?

What can we do to ensure the evacuation of the White Helmets—people who have been responding and doing amazing work there on the ground? I have read some disgraceful things in recent days about the work of the White Helmets. I can tell Members that they are not true and that those people are helping to save lives. I am proud that we are supporting them, and that Jo Cox supported them and that her foundation supports them now. Any suggestion that those people are doing anything other than a good job is simply unacceptable.

Finally, we must look at the precedent. If we see what is happening in Aleppo today, we can see that it will happen also in Dara, Raqq and Idlib. If this is the approach that we are going to take and we are not going to stand up at this moment, we will only see these kind of atrocities played out again and again over the weeks and months to come. We must stand up and show that we have some common humanity. We have to do the extraordinary and step outside our natural caution and our fear of these events. People are dying right now and we need to act.

2.54 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison Mc Govern) for securing this debate and you, Mr Speaker, for granting it.

The war in Syria and the slaughter of more than 450,000 innocent civilians, overwhelmingly by Assad’s barrel bombs, is without a doubt the 21st century’s most shocking and deplorable bloodletting. The carnage has been unparalleled since Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The international community’s response has been lamentable. Parliament’s reaction to events, which started in 2013, has been feeble. Assad, Russia and Iran’s response has been criminal and the repercussions and shock waves will be felt for decades.

What we need to hear from the Foreign Secretary today is this: what are the Government doing with their allies to push for a meaningful immediate ceasefire and safe passage for any remaining civilians, of which there are believed to be between 50,000 and 80,000? I have a 15-year-old son. He is nearly my size, but—he will not thank me for saying this—he is still a child. If he was leaving Aleppo, what chance would he have of getting through Assad’s soldiers and surviving that experience? There are hundreds of thousands of civilians out there who are worried about their children.

We heard from the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who is no longer in his place, about his concerns with airdrops, which clearly cannot be undertaken lightly. We need to hear from the Foreign Secretary that recent acts of consideration the Government have given to airdrops and the solutions that do not involve pilots advocated by the Opposition. Are those airdrops relevant to other parts of the country? Even if they are
not relevant in Aleppo, other parts of Syria are clearly still under siege and may benefit from airdrops.

The Foreign Secretary needs to tell us what the Government are doing in relation to documenting human rights abuses. From a sedentary position, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), has indicated that the Government are working on that issue. I hope that we can hear as much as possible about that. The Government, for very obvious reasons, may not want to reveal how that is being documented, but we do need to hear what work is being done.

We also need to hear what work can be done to hit the Russians where it really hurts them. Clearly, we will not engage in military action with the Russians, but what we can do—the Government will have an opportunity with the Criminal Finances Bill—is hit them in their pockets. Many Russians love to spend their money in the UK. They love to buy properties here; love to buy their cars here; and love to send their children to school here. That is an area where the Government can do something. The Magnitsky amendment that is being proposed to the Criminal Finances Bill is about seizing the assets of foreigners who have committed gross human rights abuses. I want to hear from the Foreign Secretary that the Government will support that amendment, because we know that many of the Russians involved in Syria will have assets here that we could seize.

The Government of Syria have tied themselves to Russia and Iran, which see it to their advantage to encourage Syria’s atrocious behaviour and so perpetuate Assad’s reliance on their support. Assad’s position, for the time being at least, is secure. What new initiatives can the UK, working with its allies, offer to help bring the fighting to an end. Some call for the creation of an enclave in eastern Syria, which would be free of Assad and ISIS forces and which is, as I understand it, where the Kurds and the UK and French special forces are active at the moment. Could such an enclave provide part of a solution?

Only after the violence stops will people begin to recover from the trauma of this horrible war and only then will it be possible for Syrians to think and talk productively about how to begin transforming Syria into a country in which all its people can live in security and dignity. The UK must be prepared, if it is allowed, to play its part then. Will we be ready?

2.59 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): As we have heard, in the opposition areas of Aleppo, people are fearing retribution for all—men, women and children alike. There are reports of extra-judicial killings, mass detentions and arrests. Just a few minutes ago, the BBC reported that the UN’s human rights office said that it has reliable evidence that in four areas 82 civilians were shot on sight. We all fear that this is just one example.

All this adds horribly to the imperative for urgent international action. With hindsight, we can see that when in 2011 the peaceful Syrian democracy movement was largely ignored by the international community, it was inevitable that others, wedded neither to peace nor to democracy, would step in. The regime’s response was predictable, not least given the vicious response of the President’s late father, Hafiz al-Assad, to previous uprisings, such as the one in Hama in 1982, where reportedly 20,000 people were killed, the vast majority of them civilians, and the city was destroyed by heavy weapons.

Some years ago, a very close relative of mine spent some time in Syria, working in Damascus in the education system. She tells me that the memories of Hama were very live even at that time, 20-odd years later. Terror was being used as a deliberate part of the regime’s armoury, as it has been since the Ba’ath party seized power in 1963.

The White Helmets now report that tens of thousands of people are trapped as indiscriminate attacks, both ground and air attacks, continue with even greater ferocity, following on from the previous inhuman attacks on the very weakest points, deliberately targeting hospitals, water and food supplies, and aid convoys.

My colleagues in Plaid Cymru support the calls for an immediate ceasefire and safe passage for civilians and rebels out of Aleppo.

The international community has largely failed the people of Syria so far. One redeeming aspect is this Government’s current policy of commitment to material aid. I am happy to salute them for that. Does the Foreign Secretary therefore agree that now is not the time to cut the foreign aid budget?

I fear that the current inhuman conflict is sowing the seeds of future horrors in Syria, the middle east and western Europe, so, irrespective of the humanitarian argument, it is very much in our interest that we take action on the side of humanitarianism, democracy and eventual peace.

3.2 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me. I follow on from the many excellent speeches that we have heard in today’s debate. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), I have visited—in my then role as chair of the all-party group on genocide prevention, alongside you, Mr Speaker—Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo and, more recently, South Sudan, and I have seen there the long, painful process of rebuilding in countries where genocides have taken place.

One of the many problems when genocide and war crimes take place is that there is a fog of war around them. I remember living and working in Brussels during the Rwanda genocide and not really understanding, as I was reading the newspapers in French, what was happening between Hutu and Tutsi, who were the good guys and who were the bad guys, but seeing the people fleeing from Rwanda and later from Zaire, now DRC.

In the Syrian conflict, however, there has been no lack of information. Everything has been appearing on social media. People have been live tweeting their own suffering and their own death. That is why the citizen journalists and the humanitarian workers are more feared by the regime and by the Russians than the rebel fighters. We have seen the images—images that I personally would rather not have seen—of dead children who were murdered in Homs and Hama in 2011 and 2012. We in the west, in particular the US and the UK, drew a red line by saying that we would intervene if chemical
weapons were used. That fatal vote in August 2013, as the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) said, has had long and very significant consequences.

Our inaction created the political space for the Russians to move in and to offer to decommission the chemical weapons. We have all seen how successful that decommissioning process has been—we have watched as sarin gas, chlorine gas and napalm have been dropped on schools and hospitals in Aleppo and throughout Syria. We have seen the Russian propaganda campaign of misinformation and their pretence of being honest brokers when the west failed or stood by.

Our inaction also opened up military space—Assad released the jihadis from jail to go out and create mayhem in his country. It served as a recruiting sergeant for 30,000 jihadi fighters from more than 100 countries to go and fight for Islamic State, and it served to create the geographical space where Daesh could claim its caliphate, and groom and lure our own young people to go over there and waste their lives as jihadi brides or jihadi fighters. They now find themselves stuck there in the horror of a nihilistic death cult.

The result has been political space captured by the Russians and military space given to Islamic State-Daesh, enabling them to create mayhem in the region and to export it to Turkey and to Iraq where, let us not forget, Mosul has been under Daesh rule for two years, notwithstanding the long and painful efforts of a coalition trying to take back the space in Iraq. The export of chaos from Syria has resulted in 11 million refugees, 7 million of them in their own country, and 400,000 dead. We cannot claim that we did not know what was happening. That toll has been the result of our own inaction.

It is a bitter irony that this country went to war in Iraq over weapons of mass destruction which were subsequently found not to be there, possibly having gone over the border to Syria, where we see that they have been used. Now, when we see weapons of mass destruction being used in Syria, we are not prepared to take action. How weak, how diminished, how futile is the rules-based international order. We see Secretary of State Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, telling the US Secretary of State to “stop whining”. That is the contempt in which Assad and Putin hold western powers in the region.

When the Foreign Secretary replies to this debate, will he tell us how the workers of UK charities who are in the region. contempt in which Assad and Putin hold western powers take action. How weak, how diminished, how futile is

have been used. Now, when we see weapons of mass destruction happening to the civilians that are trying to flee Aleppo right now and no action is being taken.

I am very, very disappointed and heartbroken that the free world has left civilians who chanted the values the west believes in like freedom, democracy and dignity, and they are left starving and facing the Russian, Iranian and Assad regime brutality alone. We are left alone.

I urge the UK not to bomb Syria but we need aid drops. It is not too late. There are besieged areas in Damascus suburbs, besieged areas all over Syria. Use these planes to create safe corridors to protect the civilians—not to bomb them.”

I cannot add to the many comments that have been made on both sides of the House that sum up the despair and frustration that people in this country and others feel about the situation in Aleppo. However, I want to reflect on the fact that it is just over a year since we had a vote in this House on whether to join military action in Syria. Those of us on the SNP Benches opposed that motion, yet we were assured that if we voted to join that military action, we would cut off the head of ISIS, provide air support for 70,000 ground troops and be part of co-ordinated military action that would lead to and enhance a political solution. It is now terrifyingly obvious that none of those things has come to pass.

Another thing suggested was that joining that military action would give this country and this Government greater leverage in trying to influence events as they unfolded in Syria. It seems terrifyingly obvious that that is not the case either, and I am sure that there are many in this House, and many throughout the country watching their television screens, whose main feeling is one of frustration at the apparent impotence of our Government when it comes to getting involved and doing anything.

I think that some people—perhaps not those sitting on the Government Front Bench, but certainly some people in the Foreign Office—need to go on an assertiveness
training course. They need to speak a lot more loudly and more emphatically than they have thus far. I would like to see this country leading, not following: not being a bystander watching the discussions of others, but getting involved, getting our hands dirty and trying to sort the problem out. After all, if this problem was not caused by France and our own country, whose problem is it? We have a responsibility to the world to show leadership, and I hope very much that we will do that.

Along with many in this House, I am very angry at, and opposed to, the actions that Russia has taken militarily in recent months. However, I would say this to the House: the way forward is not going to be to demonise President Putin, to try to move to a new cold war or to try to pretend that Russia does not have legitimate interests in the region. I would like to see firm but emphatic engagement with the Russian authorities and an insistence from this Government that they need to be part of the equation and part of the plan.

We should call Russia to account and insist that humanitarian aid is prioritised and that corridors are allowed so that it can be delivered. We should stand up and be seen to be doing that. Let us get on the planes. Let us have the shuttle diplomacy. Let us be seen to speak out for the people of this country, to lead international opinion and to put pressure on the Russians and others who are trying to make a bad situation worse.

We also need to call out the Turkish Government on their actions in this affair, because they have been none too helpful. Turkey's support for the al-Nusra front has created a fig leaf of credibility for the Russian military's excuse that the people of eastern Aleppo are somehow in a terrorist enclave that needs to be liquidated. That is unhelpful, as is the hostility of the Turkish Government to pretty much any sentiment expressed by the Kurdish population in the region.

So, let us take action now to deliver the humanitarian aid, to make sure there is a ceasefire that can be policed and, most of all, to make sure that war crimes, if they have been committed, will be recorded and that those responsible will be brought to book in the future.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Here we are when over 2 million tonnes of cargo were delivered to the Syrian Government. Indeed, the International Syria Committee and other non-governmental organisations have been calling on the World Food Programme to use air bridges to deliver aid by helicopter for use of an air bridge system to deliver aid by helicopter to safe landing sites identified by the White Helmets Committee and other non-governmental organisations delivering aid by air.

We have heard repeatedly of the risks and of the difficult logistics of aid drops, but we have also heard of the proposals from graduates at the University of Aleppo to sort the problem out. After all, if this problem was not created on the ground, on some of the practical solutions we have heard about and on the role the Government can play. We hear that the Assad forces are on the brink of seizing control of the city, but in doing so it seems they are playing out the ancient saying: they have made a desert and called it peace.

Patrick Grady: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Patrick Grady: No, I have very little time.

Quite how the word “victory” could apply to the almost utter destruction of a city and to the death and displacement of so many people is beyond me and, I suspect, most of us. The destruction continues, with both sides responsible for atrocities and horror. The number of people displaced within the country and over its borders is greater than the population of Scotland and just slightly greater than the population of London.

While we recognise the humanitarian contribution the United Kingdom has made, there must be more it can do. That must extend to the welcome it provides to the Syrian refugees who make it to the United Kingdom—20,000 refugees from Syria over the lifetime of this Parliament is simply not enough. It would be helpful to hear from the Government how they want to work with humanitarian organisations on the ground in Syria and in neighbouring countries. Local organisations have a much deeper reach and much better understanding of the immediate situation than multilateral or bilateral agencies.

In Aleppo itself, as many Members have said, we now surely require an urgent and specific response. We on the SNP Benches have repeatedly called for aid drops, and the Government have repeatedly said that that would be an option of last resort. Well, what is the penultimate resort? What is preventing these aid drops? No food has been delivered to Aleppo for seven months. What alternatives are the Government pursuing?

We have heard repeatedly of the risks and of the difficult logistics of aid drops, but we have also heard of the proposals from graduates at the University of Aleppo about how the United States joint precision airdrop system could be deployed. I have asked the Minister written questions about that. It would be helpful to hear from him what discussions the UK is having with the US and other allies about the applicability of that system, and whether it presents a more secure way of delivering aid by air.

The Minister might also be aware of proposals in recent days from members of the Disasters Emergency Committee and other non-governmental organisations for use of an air bridge system to deliver aid by helicopter to safe landing sites identified by the White Helmets and others. In their letter to the Prime Minister, the agencies cite the UK’s role in the 1948-49 Berlin airlift, when over 2 million tonnes of cargo were delivered to 2 million residents of west Berlin. Will the Prime Minister be responding to that letter from some of the most respected aid agencies in this country?

The agencies also make the point that UN Security Council resolution 2163 authorises the UN to undertake cross-border aid delivery without the permission of the Syrian Government. Indeed, the International Syria Support Group, of which Russia remains a member, called on the World Food Programme to use air bridges and airdrops if land access continues to be denied. So what steps are the Government taking to be ready when, or if, the situation stabilises?
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Yesterday I spoke at a conference for Syrian refugees living in my constituency and across Edinburgh, and I met an accomplished artist from Aleppo, Nihad Al Turk, who berated me for the lack of action on all our parts. Has my hon. Friend just described practical steps that we could take at this stage of last resort so that perhaps the next time I meet this gentleman, and other Syrian refugees, in Edinburgh I will have something concrete to say?

Patrick Grady: I thank my hon. and learned Friend. That is the point: concrete, specific proposals are brought forward and we get told, “No, they’re not practical—they’re not possible.” So what are the alternatives? How will this aid otherwise be delivered?

As other Members have said, this situation brings into question the entire multilateral system and the role of the UN Security Council in its seeming inability to respond to the regime. The Government will be aware of statements issued by faith leaders, and a statement co-ordinated by Amnesty, supported by over 200 civil society organisations, calling for a greater role for the General Assembly of the United Nations and a special emergency session of the Assembly “to demand an end to all unlawful attacks in Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria, and immediate and unhindered…access” for humanitarian aid. Will the UK Government support this call? As I said in the previous debate, the UK’s position on the Security Council is supposed to be one of the great advantages of the Union—Britain’s force in the world—so how is that diplomacy going to be used as a force for good?

SNP Members have repeatedly said that if we can drop bombs in Syria, we should be able to drop bread. The need is great, and the technology and the solutions are there. If stability comes, irrespective of the horrific circumstances, then aid must be allowed in. The Government must be preparing now so that as soon as an opportunity arises they can show leadership and begin to help people to rebuild a city and their lives, which currently lie in ruins.

3.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for securing this debate on a matter that the whole House feels so strongly about. I listened very carefully to all the speeches and found myself greatly in agreement with much that has been said by Members on both sides of the House.

After five months of siege and almost a year of bombardment, we are now reaching the end of the siege of Aleppo, and Assad’s forces are doing their utmost to stamp out the last embers of revolt. The dictator’s militias have carved paths of destruction through crowded streets destroying hospitals, severing water supplies and herding thousands of people from their homes. I will come in a minute to what we have tried to do as the UK Government, what we continue to do and what we will do in future. I will also, of course, discuss the tragic limitations that we have faced in our actions so far.

First, it is worth going back and remembering how this tragedy has unfolded. As long ago as July, the regime sealed off eastern Aleppo and then defeated two abortive efforts to break the siege. Notch by notch, Assad tightened the noose. The last UN convoy entered eastern Aleppo on 7 July. The last food rations were handed out on 10 November. The last functioning hospital was targeted by an airstrike and knocked out of action on 19 November. Some 275,000 men, women and children were then trapped in eastern Aleppo without food, medical care, or even, in many cases, electricity and water. In this piteous condition, they endured ceaseless attack from air and ground, notably by barrel bombs dropped from Syrian military helicopters.

I know that time is short, but it is worth reminding the House of exactly what a barrel bomb is and why it makes such a hideous weapon. Imagine a metal drum filled with petrol and explosives, and laced with nails and jagged shards of metal. These objects—[Interruption.] People watching and listening around the world may not know what they are. These objects are loaded on board helicopters, which then hover over civilian areas. The men on the helicopters simply light the fuses of the barrels before rolling them out of the door, leaving them to fall to the ground where they shred and incinerate any human being within range. There is no guidance system or targeting. Barrel bombs have no military purpose; they cannot be dropped near a frontline for fear of striking friendly forces. Their sole purpose is to murder civilians. Scores of these awful weapons have been used against the people of eastern Aleppo by Assad every day.

The collapse of the rebel-held districts began on 26 November and has gathered pace. In the areas recaptured by the dictator, we have already heard reports today of hundreds of young males being separated from their families and marched away to an unknown fate. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights today reported that civilians have been “killed on the spot”. As this tragedy has unfolded, the Government have sought to reduce the suffering with every diplomatic and humanitarian lever at our command. I must tell the House that we have used every effort at the UN. Even today, we are, along with the French, calling for an emergency meeting of the Security Council. I know that our excellent ambassador, Matthew Rycroft, will be conveying at the UN many of the sentiments expressed in the House.

On 8 October, we tried to secure a UN resolution that would have urged a ceasefire. It demanded that “all parties immediately end all aerial bombardments of…Aleppo”. That resolution was vetoed by the Russians. On Monday of last week we tried again, throwing our weight behind a draft resolution co-sponsored by Egypt, Spain and New Zealand that urged a seven-day ceasefire in Aleppo to allow the evacuation of casualties and the delivery of aid. Once again, Russia vetoed the resolution, joined by China. I think that the House will join me in condemning those in Moscow and Beijing who would not allow the people of Aleppo even a seven-day respite. I must say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield that I have had information from Aleppo—I am sure that other Members have, too—that even today the Russians are blocking the evacuation of the injured and of medical staff from the very zones they are attacking.

Stephen Doughty: Given what the Foreign Secretary has said about Russia and China’s behaviour and their failures, what will the consequences be for Moscow and Beijing?
Boris Johnson: We are gathering all the information that we think will be necessary for the prosecution of those guilty of war crimes, but the diplomatic pressure must continue. It was asked earlier what we are doing in the EU: I can tell the House that the UK stood up at the last meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council and argued for tightening sanctions against Russia in respect of Syria as well. I wish that the rest of the EU would follow suit.

Last Saturday I broke off a visit to the middle east to fly to Paris to discuss these matters with Secretary Kerry. I pay tribute to John Kerry for his efforts, but they have not prevailed. We jointly demanded that the “regime and its backers” allowed the UN to deliver aid “with immediate effect.” Assad has doggedly refused to allow the UN to deliver supplies to hundreds of thousands of people, many of whom are now starving. He is content for his own people to be reduced to starvation, even though there are UN warehouses full of food within easy reach.

Alison McGovern: What specific action to protect civilians will the Foreign Secretary tell the Prime Minister that she should propose to our European colleagues when she goes to the European Council next week?

Boris Johnson: What the Russians need to do—is what our European colleagues should do as well—is to institute an immediate ceasefire. It is up to the Russians, and, I am afraid, to the Assad regime, to institute a ceasefire. I will come in a minute to the deficiencies and problems that our decision in 2013 left us with today. Many Members have sought to find fault with the UK Government and what we have tried to do. Given that we are contributing £2.3 billion of aid, many Members have asked an entirely legitimate question: why do we not fly in aid ourselves? Labour Members have asked that very question: why do we not drop aid on eastern Aleppo from the air? Many have spoken in favour of aiddrops. In recent weeks since we last discussed this matter in the House, we have studied that option with great care. Working with my colleagues across Whitehall, and working with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and the RAF, I must tell the House that we have come up against some hard realities.

Mr Bradshaw: When the Foreign Secretary complains, as he repeatedly does, about Russian behaviour and Russian vetoes, does he understand that he sounds exactly like the Conservative Foreign Secretaries in the early 1990s who said exactly the same thing about the Balkans? We subsequently had a Labour Government who showed leadership, assembled a coalition and got American support to do something to stop the genocide. What is he doing?

Boris Johnson: I hope that the hon. Lady will forgive me if I make some progress, because I have very little time left.

For aiddrops to be accurate, they must be conducted at low level and low speed. Russia has deployed its most advanced jet fighters and surface-to-air missiles in Syria, which makes it impossible for us to carry out aiddrops without Russian permission. Even if Russia were to give its consent, our aircraft would still have to fly over areas of Syria that are hotly contested by a multitude of armed groups, including Daesh and al-Qaeda. They would make every effort to shoot down a British plane, and a lumbering, low-flying transport aircraft would be a sitting duck. We came reluctantly to the conclusion that aiddrops over Syria, under those conditions, would pose too great a risk.

When it comes to drones and other devices, we still face the problem that the Syrians and the Russians control the airspace. Of course it is possible that circumstances might change, so I will not rule out any option for delivering aid today, but nor will I give false hope. As things stand, we would be risking the lives of our aircrew if we tried to drop supplies into eastern Aleppo.

I pay tribute to those who have made brave efforts to evacuate wounded children. All those efforts depend on Russia and the Assad regime, and it is up to them to agree a truce. By far the most effective way of delivering aid would be for them to give permission to the UN to distribute the supplies that are piled high inside its warehouses. As long ago as December 2015, Russia voted in favour of UN resolution 2254, which urged all parties to “allow humanitarian agencies rapid, safe and unhindered access throughout Syria”.

Russia must now obey the very resolution that it supported and compel Assad to allow the UN to feed his people—[Interruption]—I say to Opposition Members who are objecting to this that if we take the pressure off Russia, we are serving the purposes of the Assad regime.

John Woodcock: Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Boris Johnson: I am afraid I will not.

There is another inescapable reality that Members must accept. On 29 August 2013, this House voted by 13 votes not to use force against Assad, even after he had poisoned hundreds of his people with sarin nerve gas. We, as a House of Commons and as a country, vacated the space into which Russia stepped, beginning its own bombing campaign on behalf of Assad in 2015. Ever since that vote, our ability to influence events in Syria, to protect civilians or to compel the delivery of aid has been severely limited. The dictator was left to do his worst—along with his allies, Russia and Iran—and the bloodiest tragedy of the 21st century has since unfolded.

I must say—the House should listen to this—that Assad’s conquest of Aleppo will not mark the end of the war. The victory will turn to ashes in his mouth, because even if he reimposes his rule over the rubble of that city, about two thirds of Syria will remain outside his control. Millions of Syrians are viscerally hostile to the rule of a tyrant who has the blood of hundreds of thousands on his hands. Already Daesh has taken the opportunity created by Assad’s assault on Aleppo to surge forwards and capture again the ancient Roman
city of Palmyra, Assad has repeatedly said that his aim is nothing less than the re-conquest of “every inch” of Syria. If he is allowed to pursue that goal, I fear that this war will continue for more years, and victory will still elude him.

My question to those who ask what we would do—let us turn the question around—is: do Russia and Iran want to stand behind Assad in this futile and indefinite struggle to subdue Syria? Do they want to be with him in siege for siege, barrel bomb for barrel bomb and gas attack for gas attack, as the tyrant reduces his country to ashes? In the months or perhaps years ahead, does Russia still wish to be dispatching warplanes to bomb Syrian cities while casting votes in the Security Council on behalf of Assad, a man for whom it has no great regard?

Alison McGovern: The Foreign Secretary mentions the vote in 2013; I will live with that for the rest of my life. May I ask again the question that I asked him earlier? There is no pressure on Russia at the moment, so why does he not tell the Prime Minister to go to the European Council and propose action that is led by the UK and supported by our European allies?

Boris Johnson: I can tell the hon. Lady that we are doing everything that we can within the constraints we face. I have described the restrictions on military options, which I think most people in this country understand.

Tom Brake: Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Boris Johnson: I am afraid that I must now wind up.

I hope that Russia will see sense and join us to secure the transition away from Assad that is the only hope for a peaceful Syria. It is up to them—the Russians and Iran—and they have the future of Syria in their hands. This is one of the darkest hours in Aleppo’s four millennia of recorded history. One day, that city will rise again, and one day, Britain will be among the countries that help to restore Aleppo to the greatness it once had. That day might seem far off now, but it will come all the faster if the Russians and the Iranians do the right thing, abandon their puppet, and promote the peaceful and political solution that is the only way forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered international action to protect civilians in Aleppo and more widely across Syria.

Mr Mitchell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following the emergency debate, may I seek your advice? There has clearly been a profound re-examination of some of the arguments that led to the result of the vote in August 2013, when Parliament was recalled during a recess. Will you advise me whether there may therefore be a case for the Government to come back to the House with a substantive motion to reflect the changed circumstances since that time?

Mr Speaker: It would absolutely be open to the Government to return to the matter, and to put before the House a substantive motion for a debate and a vote. Such an opportunity most certainly exists.

Mary Creagh: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During my speech, I requested that the Foreign Secretary describe the actions he has taken to evacuate the staff of UK-based humanitarian organisations. He failed to answer that point. Will you, on behalf of the House, seek answers from the Foreign Secretary on that specific point, which is of the utmost gravity and urgency?

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: All I can say to the hon. Lady is that I have just heard the Foreign Secretary indicate from a sedentary position that he will write to her. Might I politely ask that the Foreign Secretary place a copy of the letter in the Library of the House, because I think his answer will be of interest not only to the hon. Lady, but to many Members on both sides of the House?

Tom Brake: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure there is anything further, but I will indulge the right hon. Gentleman.

Tom Brake: I asked the Foreign Secretary whether he would support the Magnitsky Act amendments to the Criminal Finances Bill. I wonder whether he might be willing to indicate that he will respond on that point.

Mr Speaker: He might. I say to the right hon. Gentleman and any other Member who feels that his or her point has been inadequately addressed, or not addressed at all, that I am sure that the Foreign Secretary will study what has been said by colleagues and that, if he feels there are points that are unaddressed, he will write to all such colleagues. I am quite sure that the Foreign Secretary will do that.

We have to leave it there for now. We cannot continue the debate at this time, although there is plenty of scope for doing so subsequently.

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 10 October 2016 (Neighbourhood Planning Bill (Programme)) be varied as follows:

(1) Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.

(2) Proceedings on Consideration and proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion, at today’s sitting, four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this order.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion, at today’s sitting, five hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this order.—[Gavin Barwell.]
Neighbourhood Planning Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 6

COMPENSATION FOR TEMPORARY SEVERANCE OF LAND AFTER VESTING DECLARATION

“In Schedule A1 to the Compulsory Purchase (Vesting Declarations) Act 1981 (counter-notice requiring purchase of land not in general vesting declaration), in paragraph 16, after sub-paragraph (3) insert—

“(4) If the vesting date for the specified land is after the vesting date for any land proposed to be acquired, the Upper Tribunal’s power to award compensation under section 7 of the Compulsory Purchase Act 1965 includes power to award compensation for any loss suffered by the owner by reason of the temporary severance of the land proposed to be acquired from the specified land.”’—(Gavin Barwell.)

This amendment ensures that, when an acquiring authority is required to take more land than it had planned to take when it executed a general vesting declaration and the additional land vests in the authority after the land which it had planned to take, the Upper Tribunal may require it to pay compensation for the temporary severance of the land it had planned to take from the additional land.

Brought up, and read the First time.

3.41 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 3—Review of compulsory purchase—

“Before exercising his powers under section 35(1) the Secretary of State must carry out a review of the entire compulsory purchase order process.”

This amendment ensures that there is clarity on appeal routes, pre-completion and pre-occupation conditions.

New clause 12—Rates of interest and advance payments—

“Within 14 days of the Neighbourhood Planning Bill receiving Royal Assent the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the Chancellor of the Exchequer must bring forward outstanding regulations relating to Clauses 192 to 198 of the Housing and Planning Act 2016 and Clauses 19 to 21 and 33 to 35 of the Neighbourhood Planning Bill.”

The Housing and Planning Act includes measures requiring further regulations in order to come into force. This new clause requires that, once the Neighbourhood Planning Bill receives Royal Assent, these regulations should be brought into force to ensure that all farmers, business owners and landowners benefit from the Government’s commitment to improve interest rates on late payments as soon as possible.

Amendment 26, in clause 15, page 14, line 12, leave out

“as well as, or instead of, compulsory acquisition” and insert

“or compulsory acquisition, but not both”.

This amendment would ensure that where an acquiring authority seeks temporary possession rights it cannot at the same time also seek permanent possession rights. It would not stop the acquiring authority at a later date seeking permanent acquisition rights via a fresh compulsory purchase order should it be required to complete the project.

Government amendment 21.

Amendment 27, page 25, line 36, leave out clause 28.

This would remove changes which would prevent landowners who have land compulsorily purchased for a particular purpose seeking additional compensation should the land end up being used for a different purpose. It ensures that, where the original calculation of compensation that was paid did not take into account the possibility of the development that the land is now being used for, the claimant receives the correct level of compensation.

Gavin Barwell: Government new clause 6 deals with the ability to claim compensation for temporary severance when a material detriment claim has been referred to the upper tribunal. This will arise when the acquiring authority has taken possession of the part of a claimant’s land that it wants before the tribunal has determined the claim, and the tribunal then decides that it must take more of the claimant’s land. The tribunal will be able to award compensation for any loss suffered by the claimant as a result of the temporary severance of their land while the matter is being determined.

A provision to ensure that the compensation is claimable is already contained in paragraph 28(5) of schedule 2A to the Compulsory Purchase Act 1965 when the acquiring authority is proceeding by notice to treat and notice of entry. The Housing and Planning Act 2016 should have included an equivalent provision in schedule A1 to the Compulsory Purchase (Vesting Declarations) Act 1981, but that was not spotted at the time, so new clause 6 fills the gap.

Government amendment 21 is a consequential amendment to the definition of “acquiring authority” in section 172 of the Housing and Planning Act 2016 on the power to enter land to survey it in connection with an acquisition proposal. The amendment aligns the definition of “acquiring authority” with that in clause 14, so that the power to enter and survey land can be used in connection with any proposal to take temporary possession of land under that clause. The new definition still works for authorities intending to acquire the land permanently. I commend the amendment to the House.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): New clause 3 calls for a comprehensive review of the entire compulsory purchase order process. There was clear consensus among the witnesses at the Public Bill Committee evidence sessions that the current CPO system is not fit for purpose. It is convoluted and puts people off using it, which in turn has a negative impact on the delivery of development. Colin Cottage of the Compulsory Purchase Association commented:

“The existing system is not helpful for reaching quick solutions. In fact, in many ways it encourages people to be fighting with each other from the outset.”—[Official Report, Neighbourhood Planning Public Bill Committee, 18 October 2016; c. 64, Q114.]

He said that ultimately that causes uncertainty and additional cost. Richard Asher of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors said:

“I believe, and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has always believed, that codification of the whole of the CPO rules, which go back to 1845 and are highly complex, would be a sensible way forward.”—[Official Report, Neighbourhood Planning Public Bill Committee, 18 October 2016; c. 64, Q113.]

He said that he wanted a review of the system as it stands. Labour strongly believes that the legislation should be updated to enable the greater use of CPOs as a tool to drive effective regeneration and development.
strategies and to work in partnership with developers to ensure that we get the new homes and development that we need.

More than 100 years of conflicting statute and case law makes up the current CPO legislation, so small changes will not have a significant effect. Indeed, in Committee the Minister reflected on the fact that the changes, welcome though they are, would not be a game changer. I therefore ask him why the Government continue to make small changes to the CPO system bit by bit, rather than bringing forward legislation to allow us to review it and make it fit for purpose.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I wish to speak to new clause 12 and amendments 26 and 27, which are in my name.

On new clause 12, both the Housing and Planning Act 2016 and the Bill contain welcome measures to make it clear that an acquiring authority should make payments of compensation in advance—that is the important bit—of taking possession of land. They also provide a mechanism for improving the rates of interest on late compensation payments, which is important because it will hopefully encourage acquiring authorities to pay in advance, and to pay a reasonable interest rate, rather than delaying payment.

Those measures require further regulations to bring them into force. As soon as the Bill becomes law, those regulations should be brought forward without delay to ensure that landowners and business owners benefit from the Government’s previous commitment to improve interest rates on late payments.

On amendment 26, I welcome the Bill’s provisions to allow acquiring authorities to take land on a temporary basis. That will provide much-needed flexibility within the compulsory purchase system and stop acquiring authorities having to take land on a permanent basis that is required only temporarily. However, they should not be allowed to take land on both those bases. If, having taken land on a temporary basis, an acquiring authority finds that it needs to take it on a permanent basis, that should be subject to a second notice to treat and a compulsory purchase procedure.

Finally, amendment 27 is the most important, in my view. It would remove clause 28, which repeals part 4 of the Land Compensation Act 1961. That repeal will prevent landowners who have had land compulsorily purchased for a particular purpose from seeking additional compensation should the land end up being used for a different, more lucrative development. I will briefly try to explain that to the House.

The general principle of compulsory purchase is that if someone’s land is being compulsorily acquired, they should be paid the same price as if that land were being acquired on a voluntary, willing-seller/willing-buyer basis in the private commercial sector. Abolishing part 4 of the 1961 Act will mean that if the land subsequently has a different use—for example, if the planning zoning changes so that it suddenly becomes extremely valuable because it could be developed for housing or commercial purposes—the person having his land acquired will not get the benefit of that uplift. As a chartered surveyor—I declare that in my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—if I were ever selling land that I felt was likely to have such an uplift, I would always insist on an overage clause being placed on the sale, not for 10 years but for 20 or 25 years. During that time the vendor would get 50% of the value of the uplift.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister, loud and clear, that in clause 28 he is enabling acquiring authorities to acquire land on the cheap at the expense of private landowners, and I think that is unfair.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I apologise for missing the beginning of the debate—I was chairing a Select Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): You only missed one minute.

Robert Neill: I am sure it was a very important and fascinating minute. Mr Deputy Speaker, particularly as the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) was speaking—I have great regard for her. I support my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and the amendments in our names. We put them forward in an endeavour to be constructive. They reflect areas where the Government have taken valuable and worthwhile steps. New clause 12 is built on the fact that they rightly increased the rates of interest, but it is important that there is not a lacuna between the enabling legislation and the practical application of the regulations. The Minister might say, “There is another means whereby I can achieve the same objective as the new clause,” in which case my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds and I will be perfectly happy, but it is important to flag that up, particularly because the Treasury has to deal with the regulations, although I could be wrong about that. We would not want anything to fall between the gaps and prevent the Government’s good intention from being delivered in practice.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Does the hon. Gentleman have any idea of the time limit? How long would it be before that measure comes to an end, during which time the Government would be bound to give that additional compensation?

Robert Neill: We are putting the ball in the Government’s court in that regard. We have the commencement date for the relevant provisions. It seems to me that the regulation to implement them ought to follow at the time of commencement, or as close as practically possible thereto. That is what we are seeking to achieve, so that there is a smooth transition.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend rightly points out that the Government have agreed to the provisions, and therefore that Treasury approval has presumably been given because the measure will cost a certain amount of money. It would therefore be logical that, as soon as the Bill comes into force, the provisions should come into force. That is the strength of our joint proposals.

Robert Neill: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I could not put it better and need not say more on that aspect.

The key point on amendment 26 is that the word “certainty” is fashionable in the current political climate. Businesses want certainty about a number of things,
and the proposal is another example. They may well have to make contingency arrangements to relocate all or part of their operations. It is obviously much better for them to know at the earliest stage what is to be acquired on a permanent basis and what is to be acquired on a temporary basis. If it is temporary, they can plan accordingly. Nothing stops the acquiring authority from coming back for a second bite of the cherry, but businesses—it need not be a large business, and could be a small or medium-sized enterprise or a family firm—would not be left in limbo about their long-term future.

My final point is on amendment 27, and the situation is as my hon. Friend rightly says. I respect his professional expertise as a surveyor, and my experience as a lawyer leads me to the same conclusion. My experience in the local government world leads me to expect that of any local authority. My local authority is active and has a good investment fund in property in Bromley. If we acquire by private treaty, we might be forced into an overage. “We would not want that where the powers or overage.” We would not want that where the powers or overage. It would be the norm. We are seeking to acquire by private treaty, we expect to enter into overage payments. It would be the norm. We are seeking to address an equality-of-arms argument.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I understand the point the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) are making, but are they talking about a one-way ratchet? If the “different purpose” helpfully referred to in the Member’s explanatory note to amendment 27 meant that the land was worth less than the original purpose, would the landowner get a lower compensation, or is it a one-way ratchet?

Robert Neill: It is a one-way ratchet because it is designed to prevent somebody in a monopoly bargaining position from putting unfair pressure on the owner. If somebody has compulsory acquisition powers, they are not obliged to go through the free bargaining process. That is why the ratchet deliberately goes in that direction. It would prevent what I hope responsible acquiring authorities would not generally do. However, there is a risk that instead of using compulsory acquisition as a last resort, which is what we all want, acquiring authorities have a perverse incentive to say, “We will use the compulsory powers early on in the process, because otherwise, if we acquire by private treaty, we might be forced into an overage.” We would not want that where the powers or the agencies of the state are potentially bearing down on individuals or small businesses. That is the thinking behind the amendments and new clauses.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Mr John Redwood!

John Redwood: I rise, Mr Deputy Speaker, to support—

Mr Deputy Speaker: I sounded shocked because I had not realised you were here at the beginning.

John Redwood: I was in at the beginning. I have come because this an important subject and I want to support my colleagues in saying that where land is being compulsorily acquired, the aim should be to ensure that the owner gets the open market value that they would have got had they been a voluntary seller in the private sector market without the distortion of the public sector purchaser. As my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) indicated, that surely means that if there is hope value in the land, it should be included in the price. It might be possible to take care of hope value with an overage, or it might be that we can express a capital value of the hope value and clean the whole thing up in one go. Either way, it needs to be sorted out, and I hope that will be confirmed by the Minister. I believe that is the intention.

As to the Opposition argument, I think that sometimes the best is the enemy of the good. We already have 17 pages of additional legislation on compulsory purchase, and if the Opposition thought that something needed fixing or improving, this was their opportunity to table amendments to do so. The new clause is the Government’s best fix for the current legislation. I think we can do it by means of amendment to existing law. We need not redesign the whole thing. A redesign could create added hazards and complexities and bring scope for mistakes.

Rob Marris: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware of the Housing and Planning Act 2016. This is the second time that this issue has come before the House, so the idea that we do not want additional legislation or the review process proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) looks a bit thin, given that this is our second bite of the cherry in primary legislation.

John Redwood: I think we have agreement. I am saying that this is a process of continuous review and incremental improvement. The Opposition are entitled to join in—this Bill was another opportunity for them to do so—although I am pleased that we have been spared a complete rewrite of the whole legislation, as that might not have produced extra advantages and would have brought with it all sorts of hazards. I support the Government in what I assume will be their wish not to proceed with new clause 3.

Gavin Barwell: This has been a short debate on a technical but important area of the Bill that cuts to the core of our belief in this country in the importance of people’s property rights and the rightly very clear restrictions we place on the circumstances in which the state can compulsorily acquire people’s property.

I will start by responding to the official Opposition’s new clause 3. The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) explained to the House why she believed there should be a fundamental review of compulsory purchase law. A similar new clause was debated in Committee. She also made this point in the debate last week on the affirmative regulations arising from the Housing and Planning Act 2016. I suspect that compulsory purchase is one area on which it is easier to agree on the need for fundamental reform than on what that fundamental reform should be. She is right that most of the people who gave evidence to the Committee, while supporting what the Government were doing, believed that there was the potential for more far-reaching reform, but there was no consensus on what it should be.

The Law Commission looked at this issue, and what the Government did in the Housing and Planning Act, and what we are doing in the Bill, reflected its conclusions.
It came up not with a complete rewrite of the law, but with a focused set of reforms. To come to the point raised by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris), the reason we are coming back to this is that when we consulted on the previous legislation, people raised some fresh points around which there was a consensus, and that is why the Government have proceeded.

Let us see what impact the reforms in the 2016 Act, which are only just being implemented, and the reforms in the Bill will have. I hope that they will make it easier for people to use compulsory purchase when it is necessary to do so, and make the process a simpler and clearer one. We will then be in a better position to consider whether any further reform is necessary.

4 pm

I am happy to confirm to the hon. Member for City of Durham, as I have said to her before, that if there was a growing consensus about a specific package of more wide-ranging reform, the Government would look at it, as we have proved we will do in respect of the 2016 Act and this Bill. What I do not want to do, however, is to write into legislation a statutory requirement to conduct a review. My experience on inheriting the 2016 Act is that it is full of requirements for the Government to review this and that, but I want my officials focused on the fundamental issue of how to get this country to build the homes that we desperately need, not on conducting endless reviews.

It is worth putting on record that the Opposition amendment would prevent the Secretary of State from commencing the provisions in the Bill—we all agree that they are an improvement—until we had conducted the review. The Secretary of State and I are of one mind that what we need in this area of policy is to get on with things and not have further delay. Although I am sympathetic to the view of the hon. Member for City of Durham that if a consensus for a more radical review develops over time, we should look at it, I urge her to withdraw new clause 3.

Three amendments were tabled by my hon. Friends. The Members for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). Let me begin by reassuring my near neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst that he did not miss much at all in the first minute of the debate. He missed me trying to explain two very technical amendments, so he will probably consider that time well saved. I have had the opportunity to meet both my hon. Friends to discuss these issues, and I am grateful to both of them for the time they took to raise their concerns with me. I hope that I can offer at least partial reassurance on the points that their amendments were designed to raise.

In new clause 12, my hon. Friends sought to obtain a commitment on when the Government will make regulations in three areas of the reformed compulsory purchase regime. The most pressing, it was clear, are the regulations to impose a penal rate of interest on late payments for advance payments of compensation for compulsory acquisition. Allied to these are the powers to make regulations prescribing claim forms for compulsory purchase compensation and advance payments for compensation. Those powers are contained in sections 192 and 194 of the 2016 Act.

My hon. Friends also asked, understandably, when the regulations setting the rates of interest for outstanding payments of compensation and late payments for advance payments of compensation for temporary possession of land under clauses 19 to 21 will be made. I shall outline to my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds and the House what we have to do to make these things happen.

I shall deal first with late payments and advanced payments of compensation for compulsory acquisition. The power for the Treasury to make regulations to set the interest rate is contained within section 196 of the Housing and Planning Act 2016. The provisions in that section are, however, being amended by clauses 34 and 35. Once the Bill receives Royal Assent, subject to the will of this House and the other place, we shall commence clauses 34 and 35 as soon as possible, together with section 196 of the 2016 Act. My colleagues in the Treasury will arrange for the regulations setting the penal rate of interest on late payments of advance payments to come into force alongside the substantive provisions.

We shall commence the other substantive provisions on compensation and advance payments in sections 192 to 198 of the 2016 Act and clause 33 of this Bill on the same day. Clearly, I cannot predict precisely when that day will be, because it depends on the passing of this Bill, but I am happy to put on record that I recognise the extreme importance for those whose land is being taken that advance payments are made on time so that they can make alternative arrangements. The Government are therefore committed to bringing these provisions into force as soon as they are able to do so.

On the powers in sections 192 and 194 of the 2016 Act, the Government do not intend to make regulations to prescribe claim forms immediately. We intend to start with non-statutory forms in guidance, which will allow them to be easily amended in the light of initial experience. If they are a success, there would not be a need to legislate. I am sure hon. Members would agree that we should legislate only when there is a clear need to do so.

Finally, on the rates of interest for temporary possession, the commencement strategy for the new temporary possession regime is still in its infancy. I can say, however, that there should be no difficulty in bringing the interest rate regulations into force at the same time as the commencement of the substantive provision. I hope that that has reassured my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown indicated assent.

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend is nodding, and I hope he will therefore withdraw new clause 12.

My hon. Friend went on to raise one of the more difficult points in the new temporary possession regime. As he said, amendment 26 would permit either temporary possession or permanent acquisition of a particular parcel of land, but not both at the same time. A balance has to be struck between certainty for the landowner—he made that point very powerfully—and flexibility for acquiring authorities who are tasked with providing what is often vital national infrastructure.

For linear transport schemes, it is not always possible to determine the precise line of a route at the time of taking compulsory powers. The final details might not be confirmed until a late stage. The acquiring authority
must always work within the lines of the limits of deviation, but it will often be necessary to occupy much of the land temporarily in order to construct the scheme, but not to take permanent possession of the land that is actually built on. Where this is required, clause 15(3) currently provides flexibility for an authorising instrument to authorise temporary possession of land needed for carrying out construction works, as well as compulsory acquisition of the land needed permanently for the actual scheme, although clause 15(3) does not of course enable temporary possession or compulsory acquisition of the same land at the same time.

On the other hand, I would not wish, for the reasons my hon. Friend so eloquently set out, to give carte blanche to lazy acquiring authorities who cannot make up their minds early enough about what land they need on a permanent basis and what land they need temporarily just to carry out the scheme. I hope it will satisfy him if I say that I propose to issue guidance on what an acquiring authority would have to demonstrate before the confirming authority, which would be the relevant Secretary of State, confirmed an order that attempted to authorise both temporary and permanent acquisition of the same land. With that reassurance, I hope my hon. Friend will withdraw his amendment.

Finally, amendment 27 seeks to ensure that part IV of the Land Compensation Act 1961 would remain in force. The majority of those who responded to the Government consultation on further reform of the compulsory purchase order system in March 2016 were in favour of repeal of part IV, as was the Law Commission. I reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), that compensation under the ordinary rules already reflects the full market value of the land at the valuation date with all its present and future potential, including any hope value for future development—a point he made very forcefully.

The balance has moved more in favour of repeal since the reform of the planning assumptions for compensation in the Localism Act 2011, as these specifically take the conditions as known to the market at the time into account. I accept however that the arguments for and against repeal are finely balanced. In favour of repealing part IV is the argument that it introduces an element of uncertainty and unknown risk about liability for compensation for the acquiring authority, which leads to increased cost for the public sector, for example through insurance premiums. The Government believe that repeal of part IV will reduce the risk and uncertainty, while maintaining the principle of fair compensation.

My hon. Friends the Members for The Cotswolds and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) have argued passionately that the repeal of part IV would create uncertainty for claimants. Under part IV, a claimant is treated as though they have retained their investment and interest in the acquired land so that they can benefit from any increase in value generated by a subsequent planning permission. My hon. Friend argued that that reflects commercial practice in that overage clauses are routinely included in land transactions.

The perceived clash between commercial practice and the compensation rules might be reconciled if after the repeal of part IV, landowners pressed for overage clauses when negotiating with acquiring authorities over the sale of their land. That might enable deals by agreement to be struck without recourse to compulsory purchase. That is what all of us should aspire to: that acquiring authorities agree deals voluntarily with those who own land.

Robert Neill: That is a helpful point. Could the Minister provide some assistance by way of guidance for acquiring authorities to press them into adopting that kind of good practice?

Gavin Barwell: I am happy to look at that. I was just about say that the Government are not at present wholly persuaded by the arguments of my hon. Friends the Members for Bromley and Chislehurst and for The Cotswolds, so I ask them not to press their amendments on this occasion. As I said, however, the arguments are finely balanced and I look forward to them being explored further in the other place. I am certainly happy to reflect on whether we could strengthen the guidance for acquiring authorities to seek to achieve normal commercial deals in the way that my hon. Friends have described.

Robert Neill: I take it that the Minister is not ruling out returning to the matter if more evidence can be put forward.

Gavin Barwell: As I think I have made clear, we want to proceed with the maximum possible consensus on the right way of getting a set of rules on compulsory purchase that are fair to the taxpayer, the acquiring authority and landowners.

John Redwood: When the Minister drafts that guidance, he may like to include the obvious point that if those whose land is subject to compulsory purchase can reach a voluntary agreement, it will probably speed up the compensation and reduce the legal costs. There is something in it for both parties if the local authority has goodwill towards landowners. Some of our local authorities have such goodwill, but others do not. That is what the guidance must address.

Gavin Barwell: My right hon. Friend makes a perfect point on which to end this section of the debate. The point is that compulsory purchase should be a last resort. We should encourage all acquiring authorities to seek to secure land that is needed for major infrastructure projects or redevelopment schemes on commercial terms, which is quicker and cheaper and avoids all the legal costs, as he said. What we are legislating for here should be a last resort for when it is overwhelmingly in the public interest and necessary to acquire sites in order to allow projects to go ahead. With that, I hope that hon. Members will not press their amendments and that we can proceed to the next part of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 6 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 1

GUIDANCE ON CLUSTERING OF BETTING OFFICES AND PAY DAY LOAN SHOPS

“(1) Before exercising his powers under section 36(1) the Secretary of State must issue guidance to local authorities on the granting of planning for permission change of use to betting offices and pay day loan shops.
(2) This guidance must set out the manner in which policies in
neighbourhood plans and local plans about the number, density
and impact of betting offices and pay day loan shops shall be
taken into account when determining applications for change of
use, to prevent a deleterious effect on the neighbourhood or local
area.”—(Graham Jones.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Depute Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this it
will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—Planning Applications: award of costs—

“(1) Where a planning application for development meets the
terms of subsection (2), and is—

(a) refused by a local authority, or

(b) an appeal under section 78 of the TCPA 1990 which is
dismissed,

the planning authority may apply to the Secretary of State for
an award of costs to reimburse the expenses incurred by
individuals who submitted objections to the unsuccessful
application or appeal.

(2) A planning authority may only use this power if the
following conditions are met—

(a) the unsuccessful application or appeal concerned a new
commercial or residential development; and

(b) the application or appeal was unsuccessful, at least in
part, due to its incompatibility with the relevant
approved neighbourhood development plan.”

New clause 4—Sustainable development and
placemaking—

“(1) The Secretary of State must issue guidance setting out
how the principles of sustainable development and placemaking
is—

(a) reflected in neighbourhood development plans;

(b) used by local authorities to support neighbourhood
planning.

(2) “Sustainable development and placemaking” means
managing the use, development and protection of land and
natural resources in a way which enables people and communities
to provide for their legitimate social, economic and cultural
wellbeing while sustaining the potential of future generations to
meet their own needs.

(3) To support this aim local planning authorities should—

(a) identify suitable land for development in line with the
economic, social and environmental objectives so as
to improve the quality of life, wellbeing and health of
people and the community;

(b) contribute to the sustainable economic development
of the community;

(c) contribute to the vibrant cultural and artistic development
of the community;

(d) protect and enhance the natural and historic
environment;

(e) contribute to mitigation and adaptation to climate
change in line with the objectives of the Climate
Change Act 2008;

(f) promote high quality and inclusive design;

(g) ensure that decision-making is open, transparent,
participative and accountable; and

(h) ensure that assets are managed for long-term interest
of the community.”

This new clause would clarify in statute that neighbourhood
planning should be focused on the public interest and in achieving
quality outcomes including placemaking.

New clause 5—Neighbourhood Planning: Payments
to support production of plans—

“(1) Where a parish is designated as a neighbourhood area
under the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012,
and where the parish council agrees to forego some or all of the
relevant Community Infrastructure Levy Monies, the Local
Planning Authority may make available the amounts foregone
to support the parish council in the production of a
Neighbourhood Plan or a Neighbourhood Development Order.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1) the relevant Community
Infrastructure Levy Monies are those that will be payable to the
Local Planning Authority under Regulation 8 of the CIL
(Amendment) Regulations 2013 if the Neighbourhood Plan or
Neighbourhood Development Order, when made—

(a) provides for the number of houses specified for
development in that neighbourhood area under the
relevant Local Plan, and

(b) those houses are built.”

This amendment would require Local Planning Authorities to make
advances available to parish councils to support the production of
Neighbourhood Plan or a Neighbourhood Development Order. The
advances will equal the amount of income that the parish council
agrees to forego out of the CIL revenues that would otherwise be
paid to them by the Local Planning Authority once the housing
specified in the Plan or Order is built.

New clause 7—Planning decisions: involvement of
neighbourhood planning bodies—

“In place of section 75ZB of the Town and Country Planning
Act 1990 (as inserted by section 156 of the Housing and
Planning Act 2016) insert—

“75ZB Responsibilities of decision-makers in respect of
Neighbourhood Development Plans in the exercise of planning
functions

(1) In considering whether to grant planning permission or
permission in principle for development which affects land all or
part of which is included within the area covered by a made or
emerging Neighbourhood Development Plan, the local planning
authority must—

(a) have regard to the desirability of upholding the policies
and proposals contained in the Neighbourhood
Development Plan;

(b) send a copy of the application to the relevant
neighbourhood planning body;

(c) allow the relevant neighbourhood planning body a
period of 21 days from receipt of the application to
make recommendations about how the application
should be determined; and

(d) take into account any recommendations made under
paragraph (c).

(2) Where a neighbourhood planning body recommended
against the application, under subsection (1), and the following
conditions are met, the local planning authority may not approve
the application without first consulting with the Secretary of
State.

(3) The conditions mentioned in subsection (2) are—

(a) the development is not classed as a householder
development;

(b) the development is not on a site identified for the
proposed development in the relevant neighbourhood
development plan.

(4) Consultations with the Secretary of State under subsection
(2) must follow the procedures set out in provisions 10 to 12 of
the Town & Country Planning (Consultation) (England)
Direction 2009.

(5) In this section—

“emerging Neighbourhood Development Plan” means
a Neighbourhood Development Plan that has
been examined, is being examined, or is due to be
examined, having met the public consultation
requirements necessary to proceed to this stage.

“householder development” means proposals to alter
or enlarge a single house, including works within
the curtilage (boundary/garden) of the house.
This amendment would require planning authorities to consult neighbourhood planning bodies on decisions to grant planning permission. Where a planning authority wants to approve a major development against the wishes of a neighbourhood planning body, the planning authority will be required to consult the Secretary of State before granting permission.

Amendment 4, in clause 4, page 4, line 7, at end insert
“providing that the subsequent area is not smaller than a parish or town council area or local authority ward.”

This amendment ensures that the size of a neighbourhood area is not smaller than a parish or town council area or local authority ward.

Amendment 7, in clause 5, page 5, line 10, at end insert—
“(c) reasonable payments made by local authorities for the purpose set out in paragraph (a) and (b) shall be recovered from the Secretary of State’s department.”

This amendment allows for the full recovery of costs of assisting with the development of a neighbourhood plan to be recovered to the local authority.

Amendment 5, page 5, line 11, at end insert—
“(2BA) Such statements of community involvement must include a right for members of the community to make representations.”

This amendment would give local people and communities a statutory “right to be heard”.

Amendment 6, page 5, line 11, at end insert—
“(2BA) Such statements of community involvement shall include measures to enable local parish councils to be set up in a streamlined and speedy manner.”

This amendment would make it easier for new parish and town councils to be formed.

Amendment 8, page 5, line 21, after subsection (3) insert—
“(4) Section 120 of the Localism Act 2011 (Financial assistance in relation to neighbourhood planning) is amended as follows—
(a) at the end of subsection (2)(a) leave out “, and” and insert “subject to the condition that such assistance is prioritised for bodies or persons in deprived communities,”,
(b) after subsection (3)(b) insert—
“(ba) a deprived community is defined as being any area which is among the 20 per cent most deprived Lower Layer Super Output Areas according to the most recently published English Indices of Deprivation,
(bb) prioritised financial assistance is defined to mean that no less than 50 per cent of the total value of the financial assistance provided under this section is provided to deprived communities.””

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to prioritise deprived communities when making available financial assistance to support the development of neighbourhood plans.

Amendment 23, page 5, line 21, at end insert—
“(4) To support Neighbourhood Plans, all councils should have a Local Development Plan in place by December 2017.”

This amendment ensures that Local Plans are in place so have a Local Development Plan in place by December 2017.

Amendment 24, in clause 6, page 5, line 26, at end insert—
“which must consider the current and future housing needs of the whole population including older and disabled people.”

Amendment 52, page 6, line 7, after “stratagy” insert
“which must consider the current and future housing needs of the whole population including older and disabled people.”

Amendment 28, page 6, line 21, at end insert—
“(3) In section 70 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (determination of applications for planning permission: general considerations) after subsection (4) insert—
“after consultation with the local area involved.”
(5) No grant or other financial assistance shall be payable by the Secretary of State in connection with development of land in the circumstances set out in subsection (6) below.

(6) The circumstances are where a development plan document includes any of the following policies—

(a) the removal of the Green Belt designation from land in order to accommodate 10 or more dwellings;

(b) the designation of land that falls within a designated National Park, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, or Site of Special Scientific Interest to allow major housing development;

(c) the designation of land that falls within a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest to allow major housing development.

(7) The Secretary of State must by regulation set out—

(a) what constitutes “major” development for the purposes of subsection (6) (c); and

(b) any exceptions to subsection (5)."

This amendment would have the effect of preventing the Government from making payments under the New Homes Bonus scheme for developments proposed in development plan documents on land (i) where the Green Belt boundary had been redrawn or (ii) within a National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, where a development is considered to be “major”. The amendment also allows the Secretary of State to set out exceptions to this provision within policies or guidance, which would include the NPPF.

Amendment 10, in clause 10, page 10, line 19, at end insert—

“(c) they must set out a timetable to review the need for technical documents.”

Government amendments 17 to 19.

Amendment 29, in clause 11, page 10, line 35, at end insert—

“(4) Such Statements of Community Involvement must outline—

(a) the links between Neighbourhood Plans and Local Plans; and

(b) consultation arrangements for Parish and Town Councils in the drawing up of Local Plans.”

This amendment outlines the relationship between local and neighbourhood plans and the role parish and town councils would play in their development.

Government amendment 22.

Amendment 9, in schedule 2, page 42, line 15, at end insert

“must consult the relevant lower-tier planning authority.”

This amendment ensures that district councils are consulted before a county council writes a local plan for their area.

Graham Jones: I want to speak to new clause 1, tabled in my name and those of many hon. Members from across the House, and planning guidance on the clustering of betting offices and payday lenders. Fixed odds betting terminals have been described as the crack cocaine of gambling and plague our high streets. Members have witnessed innumerable issues following the explosive growth in betting shops on their constituency’s high streets. Given the number, clustering and impact of betting shops, it is high time that there was clarity in planning law on this significant problem, which my moderate new clause seeks to address.

Research by the Local Government Association reveals a clear correlation between high-density betting shop clustering and problem gambling. Betting shop loyalty cards show that 28% of people living within 400 metres of betting shop clusters are problem gamblers, compared with 22% of those who do not live near a cluster. Research from the Institute for Public Policy Research shows that problem gambling, exacerbated by clustering, costs secondary mental health services and the taxpayer £100 million a year. Further academic research has revealed that clustering disproportionately affects vulnerable communities. The poorest 55 boroughs have more than twice as many betting shops compared with the most affluent 115 boroughs. There has been an adverse impact on our high streets. Those findings were summed up by Mary Portas, who said that “the influx of betting shops, often in more deprived areas, is blighting our high streets”.

I remind some Members who might disagree that the Portas review was set up by Conservative Members when they were in the coalition Government, in the previous Parliament.

To date, deficiencies in the legislative framework have hampered efforts to address the effects of clustering on local communities. We have only to walk down any high street in a deprived area to see clusters of payday lenders and betting shops, which are affecting the vitality of our high streets.

4.15 pm

Rob Marris: I support my hon. Friend’s excellent proposal. He, like me, will be aware that for some people gambling is an addiction. This House has repeatedly passed measures in relation to addiction to alcohol and tobacco to restrict the availability of those legal products. Surely, that is all he is seeking to do here: place restrictions, through guidance, on the availability of a legal product, to cut down on its availability and lessen its attraction to addicts.

Graham Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I could add that we also have planning frameworks and guidance in place for things such as supermarkets, so why not do the same for betting shops? It seems remarkable that we can pick on supermarkets—

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): There are far more pubs and fast-food takeaways per square mile in poorer areas than betting shops. Does the hon. Gentleman also want to restrict them, to protect the people in the poorest communities?

Graham Jones: I presume the hon. Gentleman has done an impact survey and a geographical study of the number of alcoholics and whether they live near pubs and of the number of people who may be obese because they live near takeaways, but he did not offer that information, so I presume that he has no argument and is just trying to make an invalid point. [Interruption.] Caring about this issue is caring about the people who go into these bookmakers and get caught by these FOBTs, because there are clusters and these things are attractive. We also have to look at the impact on the viability of our high streets, on communities and on other retailers.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Is it not also true that there is a traumatic impact on the children and families of those who spend money on these terminals? Should we not also be conscious of that?
**Graham Jones:** Absolutely, we should be. A societal concern about this issue is about licensing, where we have the review, but this debate is about planning, because it is about clustering. That issue is separate from licensing and whether we have a limit of £2 instead of £100, or whatever the Government’s review decides. Licensing is one aspect, but today we are here to discuss the completely different issue of the impact of clustering and density and the planning provisions, or the lack of them, in legislation that allow significant clustering on our high streets. We have all read about the situation in Newham, where bookmakers face bookmakers of the same franchise.

**John Redwood:** Can the hon. Gentleman give the House some idea of how many would be a reasonable number on a high street, so that we know what he is talking about?

**Graham Jones:** The right hon. Gentleman makes my point for me; he shows why this is a modest proposal, as it asks the Secretary of State to make that designation. It is not for the Opposition or for me to prescribe this, but for the Secretary of State to provide that guidance to local authorities. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for making his point, because he, along with his Conservative colleagues in government, will be able to decide what the density, impact and clustering should be. I hope that he joins me in the Lobby when this is pressed to a vote.

**Philip Davies:** As the hon. Gentleman seems so concerned about evidence and facts, can he tell us whether the number of betting shops is going up or down?

**Graham Jones:** The issue is not whether the number of betting shops is going up or down, but whether ordinary people are affected by the consequences of this product. If there are 1 million smokers now but 999,999 tomorrow, the number is going down, but still, as Philip Morris said this week, this is a disease. No matter whether the number is going down or up, the people who are affected should be our primary concern.

**Rob Marris:** We are discussing a planning issue, and no doubt my hon. Friend will be aware that the density is decreasing in some neighbourhoods, whereas it is increasing in others. That is precisely the sort of thing that the new clause and the pursuant guidance would address.

**Graham Jones:** Absolutely. The new clause asks the Government to provide clarity. It is not a prescriptive. It does not say that the number should be x, y or z. It asks the Government to produce clear guidance for local authorities.

**Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con):** I commend the hon. Gentleman for speaking quite a bit of sense. I do not often disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), but he is wrong on a few occasions. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the key issue is the proliferation of fixed odds betting terminals and not betting shops per se? It is quite in order for local planning authorities to bring forward supplementary planning documents to address specific issues such as antisocial behaviour; it is normal in planning law.

**Graham Jones:** The hon. Gentleman is talking about the licensing aspect and the planning aspect. The answer is both. What we want is licensing. The Government are reviewing that and the number of fixed odds betting terminals in a bookmakers. I do not want to prejudice the outcome of that review or the Government’s decision. What we are talking about is the failure of the planning system, because we are dealing with planning in the Bill. The straight answer to the hon. Gentleman, with whom I am familiar, is that it is both. It is not one or the other. It is licensing and planning.

Too often, it seems that neither central Government nor local government have the capacity or the will to take responsibility in planning law for the proliferation and concentration of betting offices and payday loan shops on the high street. I want to stress here that new clause 1 is also about payday lenders. The current planning legislation is very weak at best. Any Member knows from looking down their high street and speaking to their councillors that planning law is weak on this issue, so local councillors on planning committees often err on the side of caution and grant permission to bookmakers, because their budgets are under pressure and they do not want to lose appeals. Therefore, there is a secondary reason why clarity is really important—why the law must be tightened up.

Despite the protestations of the Government and the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), article 4, which is often used by the Government as a reason in law to assist local authorities in dealing with this matter, is totally fallacious and unhelpful. Local authorities do not use it. It is not the tool that the Government say that it is. It is completely counterproductive, because it just adds to the confusion of local authority members on planning committees. They are unsure about the law and whether they can act, which is why they often grant planning permission for bookmakers.

In theory, a direction under article 4 can require bookmakers to seek planning permission, but in practice, a direction must be justified according to the strict criteria, can be overturned by the Government and is likely to be legally challenged. Its cost and complexity mean that councils are unwilling to utilise such measures. Not many local authorities use article 4. I have not made a freedom of information request recently, but when I speak to Local Government Association members and local authorities, no one tells me that they find this aspect of the law suitable for the purpose for which it was designed.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I am sure that the House will be aware that the reason local authorities very rarely use article 4 is that they can be involved in paying substantial sums in compensation for using that power.

**Graham Jones:** Absolutely. That returns to the point that I have just made, which is that we need clarity. The new clause is an opportunity to bring clarity. It is not about the Opposition trying to be prescriptive. If Members read new clause 1, they will see that it asks the Government to come forward with what they think is reasonable. It just clarifies the law and takes up the point that we do not have clarity now. It will bring clarity, so the consequences on planning committees in making decisions and compensation claims are there for all to see. That is why the LGA, the all-party group on fixed odds betting
terminals and local authorities have all demanded a clearer framework for granting planning permission to these types of development, so avoiding the problem of clustering. The new clause does exactly that, and I intend to press it to a vote.

By setting out guidelines that lay down parameters for quantity, density and the impact of those businesses on the high street, central Government will assist local authorities in their efforts to ensure that proposals for new developments are approved on public interest grounds. Accordingly, this cross-party proposal seeks to address these concerns by injecting greater accountability and responsibility into planning considerations.

John Redwood: I am still trying to learn how the measure would work. Is there a danger that, if it were adopted, there would be more betting shops in other communities that currently do not have them, because there would be a spread-out effect and more people would have easier access to betting shops?

Graham Jones: I reject that argument. It does not stand up. As I said, I shall seek to divide the House on new clause 1. The nation wants action on FOBTs, betting shops and payday lenders, and this is the opportunity.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to talk about neighbourhood planning, not betting shops. I shall speak to new clauses 7 and 8, which attempt to deal with the problem of undermining a very good policy that the Government have pioneered. The good policy is that of neighbourhood planning, which embodies the spirit of localism by giving local communities control over where development takes place. People are empowered to take responsible decisions about development. It changes the terms of the conversation from communities resisting the imposition of development to one where communities ask themselves what they want in their area. Where communities have taken neighbourhood plans forward, they have produced more housing than was anticipated in local plans. Neighbourhood plans are therefore not a means by which development can be resisted. Rather, they ensure that communities have a proper say in where development should go.

The basis on which communities have been encouraged to embark on neighbourhood plans is that for a period of 15 years they will be able to allocate sites where development will take place, and sites where development will definitely not take place and which will be protected green spaces. Many hon. Members, including me, appeared before our local parish or town councils and encouraged them to take forward neighbourhood plans on the basis that they would be protecting themselves from future development if they did so.

These neighbourhood plans are a very good thing, but they are immensely burdensome on local communities. It is volunteers who draw up the plans, and the process takes years. We are probably making it unnecessarily complex, with much inspection of the plans; they have to go through many hoops. The responsible volunteers who sit on the neighbourhood planning committees to draw up the plans often face a great deal of criticism from parts of their community that may not want development on sites whose suitability the committees have to assess. The individuals concerned put a great deal of time and effort into the plans.

West Sussex was one of the earliest counties to produce neighbourhood plans. When they were submitted to referendum, support for the plans was very high among the local communities. One of the thorniest questions in planning is what happens when communities are confronted with development that they really do not want. We embarked on the policy of neighbourhood plans with confidence that they may be a means of settling that question in a way that produced local housing in the area. One small village in my constituency, Kirdford, has only 120 houses at its centre. People there actually produced a neighbourhood plan for another 50 houses—a very big number of additional houses—because that was what they wanted, and they wanted that housing to be affordable and for local people.

4.30 pm

So, turning around the incentives is a policy that works, but what has happened subsequently is a matter of considerable concern to those who have embarked on these plans and to many hon. Members on both sides of the House, because the plans have unexpectedly been undermined by speculative developers in two ways. First, even when a plan is made—in other words, when it has gained approval in a referendum—the local authority may not have a five-year land supply. As a consequence, a planning permission is allowed that goes against what is provided for in the neighbourhood plan. It is allowed either by the local authority, which is fearful of an appeal by the developer, or on appeal. If there is not a five-year land supply, that is held against the neighbourhood plan, and that has, in some cases, allowed development to go through, even where local communities thought they were protecting their area.

Rob Marris: Reading new clauses 7 and 8 carefully, I am not sure they cover the situation to which the right hon. Gentleman has adverted. Briefly, in the Tettenhall area of my constituency, the local neighbourhood plan had a more than 50% turnout on a referendum in July 2014; the local neighbourhood plan goes through; there is then an application for a site called the Clock House; the local authority refuses planning permission; the case goes to the Planning Inspectorate in Bristol, which, in a 17-page decision, makes two brief references to the neighbourhood plan—and allows the appeal. Can the right hon. Gentleman assure me that new clauses 7 and 8 would deal with the local neighbourhood plan being overturned by the Planning Inspectorate in contradistinction to the planning authority—in this case, Wolverhampton City Council, which refused the application?

Nick Herbert: It may be a weakness in these new clauses that they may not deal with a situation where the Planning Inspectorate takes such a decision. I will not be tempted down a line I have pursued in the past, which is to question whether we should have a Planning Inspectorate at all under the provisions of localism; indeed, one Conservative manifesto promise was to abolish the power of the Planning Inspectorate to rewrite local plans, but we seem to have lost sight of that.
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend just expand on that point? Why is he no longer in favour of abolishing the Planning Inspectorate? In my experience in Sutton Coldfield, it adds precisely nothing to the process.

Nick Herbert: I am very glad to be pushed into a more moderate and Conservative position on this issue than the one I previously took. What I am focused on is ensuring that the Planning Inspectorate takes the right decisions should such developments be called in, and, more particularly, that local authorities take the right decisions in the first place. We should be minimising the number of appeals that have to go to the Planning Inspectorate because a wrong decision is made or because a decision appears to be in breach of national policy, and that means getting the national policy right. My contention is that national policy should give primacy to made neighbourhood plans, because these have been approved in local referendums.

John Redwood: Has my right hon. Friend also come across cases, which I am now seeing, where the local plan clearly has a five-year supply of land, but because it is concentrated in a major settlement—to concentrate the infrastructure and the development gain—an appeal can still be lost in another village, which naturally wants to protect itself because the development the local community agreed to was going to be concentrated in a new settlement?

Nick Herbert: Yes, my right hon. Friend makes the point very well.

The first way in which neighbourhood plans can be vulnerable to speculative development—even when it was thought that they would protect areas—is when there is not a sufficient five-year land supply in the local authority. The problem with that is that the five-year supply is not always properly in the hands of the local authority, but depends on the ability and willingness of local developers to build. Developers are undoubtedly gaming the system so as to secure speculative development applications and planning permissions, in a way that is deeply cynical and that is undermining the principles of localism and community control.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): My right hon. Friend is very good to give way on this matter. We have seen in my constituency, neighbourhood planning, about which people were slightly cynical in the first place but became enthusiastic, is now being described in a very detrimental way, and some communities are saying that they will not go ahead with neighbourhood plans.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I very much agree with my right hon. Friend, as he knows, and he is making an impeccable defence of the position, but may I urge him to correct one tiny point? It was never envisaged in the first place that there would be a sequence that involved a neighbourhood plan first and a local plan second. It was, on the contrary, envisaged that all local authorities would proceed immediately towards the new-style local plans. It is a gross dereliction of duty on the part of those that have not thus proceeded. He is therefore right, and my hon. Friend the Minister is right, to press forward with new-style local plans everywhere without delay.

Nick Herbert: Yes, I agree with my right hon. Friend. The authorities should come forward with the plans. It is also true, though, that sometimes the plans have not come forward, as in mid-Sussex and in Arun, because they have been sent back by the inspector, and the inspector, in causing delay, has allowed a situation where the housing number increases. That then puts at risk all the areas that created neighbourhood plans with an allocation that they thought was accurate according to the original assessment in the draft plan, but now is not so. It is not just the fault of local authorities that plans have been delayed, and it is undesirable that we have a situation where the cart has come before the horse.
Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) is absolutely right that it is a gross dereliction of duty. My local authority is in that category, and the net result is that we do not have a single neighbourhood plan, despite the fact that I have written to every single clerk and every single town and parish councillor in my constituency. We need to put powers in the Bill to make sure that every local authority has a local plan, so that the good people in our constituencies can go forward with their local plans in the confidence that they will not be derailed by speculative developers.

Nick Herbert: I agree with my hon. Friend. I hope that if the Government are willing to listen to this argument, as I believe they are, and come forward with proposals to deal with the situation—should the measures I have tabled not be the right way to do so—we will rebuild confidence in neighbourhood planning and it will proceed.

The measures I have tabled work as follows. New clause 7 addresses the first problem I set out. It would require planning authorities to consult neighbourhood planning bodies on decisions to grant planning permission. Where a planning authority wanted to approve a major development against the wishes of a neighbourhood planning body, the planning authority would be required to consult the Secretary of State before granting permission.

The five-year land supply is dealt with by new clause 8, which would empower the Secretary of State to issue a development order to: clarify the means by which housing land supply is assessed; define the minimum amount of time before a local planning authority’s failure to meet its housing targets would result in its local plan being out of date; and specify that neighbourhood plans should be taken into account, notwithstanding the lack of a five-year supply of housing land.

I very much hope that the Minister will respond to the new clauses in the spirit in which I have tabled them. There is a genuine problem here, but it is capable of being addressed without undermining the need to build more houses in this country. We must respect local communities that do the right thing and embark on the plans, because there is a real danger of undermining localism and communities if we do not act to ensure both that the principles of neighbourhood plans are upheld and that made neighbourhood plans that have been approved by the local population in a democratic vote cannot be overturned by speculative developers.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend is being most generous in allowing interventions. Does he have the problem that I have in my constituency, namely that the district council has very nearly, but not quite, given sufficient permissions for the set number of dwellings for the planning period, but the developers given the permissions do not make the building starts, so when the next scheming developer comes along, the district authority says no, but the planning inspector says yes, because the area has not built up to the number? Building is in the control of the developers, but the permissions are in the hands of the council.

Nick Herbert: My right hon. and learned Friend puts the point incredibly well. That is exactly how developers are able to game the system and why the way in which we calculate the five-year land supply is fundamentally flawed and is giving rise to this injustice. The loophole has to be closed, and I very much hope that the Government will do so.

Mr Mitchell: I apologise for troubling the House twice in one day, not least since I only very rarely intervene in this area of public policy, but in Sutton Coldfield we are absolutely astonished and mystified by the Secretary of State’s unwise and illogical decision to lift the stop imposed by his predecessor on the plans from Labour-controlled Birmingham City Council to build 6,000 new houses on Sutton Coldfield’s green belt. I should make it clear that we are strongly in favour of building more homes in Sutton Coldfield. My excellent local councillors—11 out of 12 of them are Conservative—have consistently sought to ensure that, where appropriate, we build new homes, because we are conscious that we want our children and grandchildren to benefit in the same way as my generation has, but those homes have to be built in the right places.

4.45 pm

I support the measures tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), and wish to speak to amendments 28 and 29, which stand in my name and those of right hon. and hon. Friends. Amendment 28 would stop the Government from paying, under the new homes bonus scheme, a bonus to those who want to build on the green belt. Such a payment is clearly a perverse incentive that encourages developers to do precisely what the Government do not want them to do—build on the green belt. I am pleased to help the Government out by tabling the amendment.

Amendment 29 addresses the importance of including town and parish councils in local plans, and the role that they can play in the development of those plans. Once again, the amendment is four-square behind the Government’s wishes, so I have much pleasure, as a former Government Chief Whip, in assisting the Government. It is inconceivable that the Minister would not accept both amendments with gratitude for my helping him out in such a way.

The Secretary of State recently said, and I quote him exactly:

“...the green belt is absolutely sacrosanct...Unless there are very exceptional circumstances”—note that he said “very exceptional circumstances”, not “exceptional circumstances”—“we should not be carrying out any development on it.”—[Official Report, 18 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 544.]

Call me old-fashioned, but I think that if a Minister, and particularly a Secretary of State, makes such a statement to Parliament, he should stand by it absolutely. However, on 24 November, speaking at a National House Building Council annual lunch—I applaud what my hon. and right hon. Friends have said about the pernicious effect of some developers—the Secretary of State agreed to lift the moratorium on Labour’s plans to build 6,000 homes on our green belt. I do not know whether he was not expecting his words to be reported, but he said:
"Birmingham City Council has put forward a plan to meet some of its local housing need by removing green belt designation from a small area of land...it's fundamentally a local decision made by local people. They've looked at all the options. They've considered all the implications."

It must have been a very good lunch indeed because those claims are wholly fallacious. Saying one thing in the House of Commons and saying another at a lunch with developers is precisely the sort of thing that brings politicians and Ministers into disrepute. The fact that people behave in that way is why we have seen the election of President-elect Trump in America, the growth of Nigel Farage in this country, and the growth of the people versus the establishment.

Mr Jackson: I am fully supportive of, and sympathetic to, my right hon. Friend’s concerns about the 2016 Birmingham local plan. Nevertheless, as of March 2016, 216,000 homes have already been allocated in emerging and existing approved local plans.

Mr Mitchell: I am coming directly to that point, but let me go back to parsing, for the benefit of the House, what the Secretary of State said at the developers’ lunch. First, he said that this was a local decision. It is not a local decision; it is made by Birmingham City Council, which is one of the largest authorities in Europe, and the views of my constituents—100,000 residents of the royal town of Sutton Coldfield—have been completely blocked out. Our 2015 manifesto stated that we would "ensure local people have more control over planning and protect the Green Belt".

The action that the Secretary of State has allowed flies absolutely and categorically in the face of that. Entirely ignored are the 100,000 citizens of the royal town of Sutton Coldfield, virtually all of whom are totally opposed to the development. They have marched in their hundreds and protested in their thousands, and 11 out of 12 Conservative councillors have opposed the process.

We have the largest town council in the country. It is totally and unanimously opposed to the development, but it has not even been consulted. Will the junior Minister commit to going back to Birmingham City Council and suggesting—I do not think he has the power to force the council to do this—that common decency expects it to go back to the 24 elected members of the largest town council in the country, formally consult them and listen to what they have to say?

Labour has been trying to build around and emasculate the royal town of Sutton Coldfield for 30 years—it refers to us as “North Birmingham”—and, thanks to the Secretary of State, it now might well succeed. My 100,000 constituents have been totally and completely disfranchised. That is the very definition of the tyranny of the majority over the minority, and the Department and the Secretary of State have now made themselves complicit in this.

On the second point that the Secretary of State raised, neither the council nor the Department, and certainly not the inspector, has looked at the patently obvious alternatives. There could be a much more comprehensive regional approach, which the excellent Conservative mayoral candidate for the west midlands, Andy Street, has spoken up for. There are superb plans to build a Wolverhampton garden city, almost all of which would be on brownfield land, to provide 45,000 houses. There are small brownfield sites in Birmingham that have specifically not been included for consideration. We in Sutton Coldfield came up with the very reasonable proposal that there should be an eight-year moratorium on building 6,000 homes on the green belt while the other 45,000-plus were built on brownfield sites. That approach would enable the Government and the council to review the extent to which building on the green belt might be needed or acceptable. However, the proposal was rejected, without even any consideration by the inspector.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England made an excellent submission in February, which I sent to the Minister on 16 August. It made many excellent points that have not been addressed. I point out that when Birmingham was controlled by a coalition of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, Tory councillors had plans to build the same number of houses as are now proposed by Labour-controlled Birmingham City Council, but without needing to encroach on the green belt. By definition, there are not even exceptional circumstances for building on the green belt, let alone "very exceptional circumstances", which were the words used by the Secretary of State.

I accept of course that these are Labour plans, but Sutton Coldfield has been grievously let down. I believe that we were and are entitled to expect the protection of the Government, based on their manifesto commitment, and I am deeply disappointed that we have not been able to rely on that. The transport problems on our side of the Birmingham conurbation that will be caused by the development will be acute and horrific. There is no guarantee that the Labour council will spend the necessary money on infrastructure for these new builds. There was no proper consultation with the relevant health services and authorities, although the council was obliged to carry that out.

The Government have got themselves into a mess on the green belt by trying to face both ways at the same time. With this decision, they have massively shot themselves in the foot. My right hon. and hon. Friends will not trust the Department on issues involving the green belt, about which many of them are extremely sensitive, because of the ludicrous nature of this decision. Building more homes, which we all want, will therefore be much more difficult for the Department.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on making a very cogent case. Does he accept that the reason the green belt has a high designation is that such areas are very special—they are green lungs in and around our great cities? Once they are built over, they are very difficult to recreate.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend puts the argument eloquently. That is exactly what my constituents feel. The west midlands has less green-belt land than many parts of the country, which is another reason why there should have been a much more holistic and imaginative approach, rather than this appalling scheme.

Amendments 28 and 29 offer the Government a chance to show good faith with regard to our 2015 election manifesto. I do not propose to trouble the House by pressing them to a Division, but I warn the Government that if they do not accept the principle
behind what I am saying, if not the amendments, not only will they have great difficulty on house building, because they will not be trusted on the green belt, but I have no doubt that the other place, which has a strong history of looking at these matters, will oblige this House to think again.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I rise with three purposes, the first of which is to support my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), whose new clauses I have put my name to. The pu[...]

Sir Oliver Letwin: I rise with three purposes, the first of which is to support my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), whose new clauses I have put my name to. The purport of what he said is clearly right. Those of us who were in on the birth of neighbourhood planning and believe in it are troubled by things that have happened more recently, among which are those that he described. Clearly some remedy is needed. The only thing that I want to add to what my right hon. Friend said so clearly and well is that the written ministerial statement that we have now seen is an admirable way to deal with those issues. Clearly we will want to ensure that the statement is observed in the observance and not in the breach.

Gavin Barwell: It may help the House and my right hon. Friend if I let him know that I have written today to the chief executive of the Planning Inspectorate and to chief planning officers across the country to draw their attention to the guidance.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am delighted to hear that. I wish I could be absolutely confident that the inspectorate will always listen to the guidance it receives from Ministers, but I hope that it will on this occasion. If it does, I believe that the written ministerial statement will do the trick that we were trying to perform with the new clauses. If it does not, I am sure the Minister will come back with further evolutions of planning policy, of which, effectively, the written ministerial statement is a part.

Secondly, I want to refer briefly to the powerful speech made by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), amiably and enthusiastically though he is, and this is one of the many occasions on which I disagree with him profoundly. It is a very sad spectacle to see our fellow citizens—I have watched them do this—moving from payday lending shops directly into betting places. Nothing could be more deleterious to the things that this Government hold dear and that my party has fought for over many years—since the days when my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) first brought out “Breakdown Britain” and “Breakthrough Britain” to try to restore the stability of family life and workfulness in households that suffer all too often from a desperate effort, as part of a chaotic lifestyle, to improve their lot through betting, which is a snare and a delusion.

It is extremely reprehensible that there has been a focus on building payday lending and betting shops right by each other. It is also extremely reprehensible that betting shops have been built in the poorest areas. If they were built in the middle of the richest areas of our cities, one would object to them much less, because people there can afford to bet. I am therefore very much on the side of the hon. Member for Hyndburn and those, including hon. Friends of mine, who have signed his new clause to try to ensure that the Government come forward with measures to limit such clustering. The reason I shall not join him in the Lobby this afternoon is solely that the new clause would require the Government to do so before going forward with the rest of the Bill, and I cannot accept that. I hope that Ministers will respond by taking forward the spirit of the new clause without that caveat.

Graham Jones: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman’s generous comments. The Government are taking forward licensing, but this is probably the last chance to deal with the planning element, which is not part of the Government’s review—those are two separate entities. I wondered whether that was the point he was raising.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I do not think this is the last chance anybody will have to reflect on the planning element, partly because the Bill will be considered in another place and partly because history shows that there is roughly one planning Bill a Session. As we can never get these things right, there is a process of continuous revision. It is also partly because I hope that, as part of the licensing review, the Government will look at the issue of clustering—it might be possible to approach it in that way—and partly because it is open to the Minister to produce the kind of guidance that the new clause seeks without turning that into a precondition for moving forward with the rest of the Bill.

Gavin Barwell indicated assent.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I see the Minister nodding and hope that, apart from my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, we can move by consensus in that direction.

The third reason—the main reason—why I rose was to speak to new clause 5, which I tabled. I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me and talking through the proposition. I tabled the new clause in the hope not that it would be accepted immediately, but that it would induce the Department to bring forward an array of policies—I doubt it can be just one—to solve a particular problem. The new clause would help to solve it in a particular way, and I hope that the measure might come back in some form as a Government amendment in the other place.

5 pm

The problem is cognate with the one that my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs talked about—it is another aspect of the same problem. As he rightly pointed out, the formation of a neighbourhood plan is quite a complicated and arduous undertaking. Those of us who are passionate about neighbourhood planning believe that, in the long run, those plans are the way to resolve the tension that has hitherto existed between the desire to maintain communities and the appearance of the places in which we live, and the need to house our people. The problem that neighbourhood planners face in trying to achieve that noble goal is that they are all too often daunted by the immense amount of work involved.
The only way in which that problem can really be resolved is for neighbourhood planners to employ professionals, particularly of two kinds. The first type of professionals can help with knotty questions of law and planning guidance. It takes someone who is fully paid up and knowledgeable to guide those involved in a neighbourhood plan through the questions that have to be answered: what are the strategic elements of the plan that will have to be observed; what constraints related to areas of outstanding natural beauty and sites of special scientific interest have to be observed; and how does the whole thing have to work to cohere with law and guidance?

The second type of professionals whom neighbourhood planners need to be able to employ are of a quite different kind: those with the imagination to enable people who are not in any sense experts, but who have a feel for their neighbourhood, to envisage what a particular set of policies in a neighbourhood plan, and ideally in a neighbourhood development order, will produce on the ground. Such professionals can conceptualise and draw what that will look like—literally, on pieces of paper or for display on overhead projectors—and work with the neighbourhood interactively at meetings. They can enable people to see what they cannot yet see so that they will know whether it is what they were looking for. That is actually quite a talent. Many hon. Members spend time trying to work out whether a settlement or an article of a law will work in a particular way and will have to be changed. One thing that the Minister’s officials are not used to doing is actually putting it on paper and seeing what it would look like in a neighbourhood plan.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I am listening intently to the excellent speech of my right hon. Friend and neighbour. Does he agree that the planning process is often not clear, especially regarding the points that he mentions? In my area—the Purbeck District Council area—people have a lot of different views about how many houses there should be. Two numbers have been suggested, but we cannot find anyone who can agree on a number without fear of going to the planning inspector. The lack of clarity, or the lack of guidelines or of regulation—I do not know what it is the lack of—leads to chaos, anger and confusion.

Sir Oliver Letwin: My hon. Friend illustrates very well the point I am trying to make. There is actually perfect clarity on that subject in the local plan that his local authority and mine have jointly drawn up, but an expert is needed to interpret it for the neighbourhood. We cannot expect the parish council to know the answers to the questions, and if it asks inexpert people, it will get conflicting answers—very possibly more than two wrong answers if it consults more than two inexpert people. A certain amount of money is required so that the parish council can employ a genuine expert who can give it good, clear answers to questions. As I have said, a second person is also needed—quite a different sort of person who can imagine for the neighbourhood what things could look like. By putting those together, we can overcome the obstacles to neighbourhood planning.

Unfortunately, those people do not come for free; they have to be paid for. Over the years, the Department has rightly produced funds to enable parish and town councils and neighbourhood forums to employ people, but unfortunately the funds were based on the presumption, which is now mercifully falsified, that neighbourhood planning would be slow to take off, and that very few plans would be produced at any given moment.

I am delighted that the number of neighbourhood plans is very great, and I hope it will be much greater—I hope that they become the norm and that tens of thousands arise in our country in the coming years. However, I very much doubt that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who faces one of the most difficult fiscal situations in our history, will come up with the funds required to meet that need, given the other priorities he faces. New clause 5 would find a solution to that problem and provide the money to employ experts on behalf of neighbourhood planners in parish and town councils. It would do so by using an existing pool of funds, as there is already a provision to share the community infrastructure levy that arises from each house built. Under the law, 25% is due to the parish or town council in the area where the neighbourhood plan is drawn up.

One problem is that the CIL money comes in after the houses are built, whereas the money is needed before—it is needed even before the neighbourhood plan is in place so that experts can be employed to help its production. The question is how we advance those funds. The new clause suggests that we could, through the Bill, put beyond doubt a local planning authority’s lawful ability to advance sums that would accrue to the neighbourhood when the neighbourhood plan is up and running and the houses are built for the purpose of employing experts to assist in the production of the neighbourhood plan. In that way, the houses could be built and the money could come in from the community infrastructure levy, meaning that the local planning authority could be repaid.

Despite the helpful way in which the Minister has engaged in the discussion, I do not say that the mechanics of the proposal are perfect. I hope he is willing to look at it in detail as part of a range of options for solving the problem to which I allude. I hope that, when the matter is considered in the other place, the Government will come forward with their own vastly superior, rock-solid measure to solve the problem. Otherwise, neighbourhood planning could be stymied not just by the problems that my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs cited, but by an inability to pay for the expertise required.

Rob Marris: I know you have kindly expressed an interest in my occupational history previously, Mr Speaker. At one point very briefly many years ago, I practised planning law. I remember two things about it. First, it is incredibly technical. Secondly, as adverted to by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), it seems to change. Like criminal law, we seem to have an annual Bill on planning or matters relating thereto before Parliament. This year we have had a bumper year and two Bills, one of which is now the Housing and Planning Act 2016.

I hope we can have a brief discussion at least on amendments 24 and 25, which are part of this group, and which urge planners to take into account the needs of older people and people with disabilities. That is important anyway in terms of equalities, but it is relevant to planning matters when we have a changing population. The population is getting older. With that, but not just
because of it, it also has a higher rate of disabilities, some of which are susceptible to being accommodated, in both senses of the word, within the planning system.

I cannot resist making some brief remarks about the speech of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell). I remember, as he might or might not, that before 1974, when I was a lad, Sutton Coldfield was not part of Birmingham. It was subsumed within Birmingham—against its wishes, I suspect, but I was not that old, so I do not recall—in 1974 and now has the town council. I was not clear—I might have nodded during his speech when he referred to the 6,000 houses—whether Sutton Coldfield has a local neighbourhood plan. He rightly referred to the concerns of Sutton Coldfield residents—concerns shared by residents elsewhere, I am sure, including in my natal city, Wolverhampton, which I represent and where I live—that there should be sufficient housing for coming generations.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned the 45,000 houses and Wolverhampton garden city. Wolverhampton is already a garden city, of course, having as it does more trees than almost any city in Europe, relative to its size, but we welcome more gardens and more people, and we are trying to build. As he might know, however, and as I know from visiting relatives in Sutton Coldfield, it is an awfully long journey, temporally, from Wolverhampton to Sutton Coldfield, so it cannot be a Sutton Coldfield overspill. On a more serious note, however, I find it strange that he berates Birmingham City Council for its spending on transport infrastructure, when Governments of which he was a member and which he continues to support—broadly—have cut its total income in the last six years by over 40%. He is right that there are transport infrastructure problems in the urban west midlands and within the city of Birmingham, as administratively constituted, including in Sutton Coldfield, but some of those problems—not all of them, but some of them—come from the huge Government cuts that he broadly supported.

Mr Mitchell: None of what the hon. Gentleman says detracts from my central argument. The important point about Wolverhampton garden city, which the Conservative mayoral candidate in the west midlands, Andy Street, makes so eloquently, is that we need a much more holistic, regional approach to ensure that the needs of his constituents and mine are met in a sensible way.

Rob Marris: I agree. I suspect that all candidates, including the Labour candidate, for the West Midlands Combined Authority mayoralty agree with the holistic approach and devolution, but we always have problems, in the House and in our constituencies, when trying to agree on what local means, as the right hon. Gentleman has eloquently set out. Someone from Bromsgrove, for example, might see Birmingham as all one place, whereas those of us who grew up in the region know that there are districts within Birmingham, and then there is the royal town, which is now part of the administrative sub-region of Birmingham City Council, many of whose 100,000 residents would not I suspect—he can correct me if I am wrong—consider themselves as Brummies, just as those of us from the black country would not consider ourselves Brummies, although we are in administratively different areas.

On the speech by the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), I have sympathy with new clauses 7 and 8. I hope that the Government want to take them forward, they will address the issue—one that I do not think they currently address but which I suspect he would support—that I raised when he kindly allowed me to intervene. Tettenhall district, in my constituency, was a separate entity until 1966, when it was folded into Wolverhampton, which in the millennium itself became a city but which before had been a metropolitan district borough. Tettenhall district, which I have the honour to represent, had a local neighbourhood plan. People, including close friends of mine, worked incredibly hard on it and knocked on an awful lot of doors, and in July 2014, the turnout—from memory—was over 50% in the referendum on whether to adopt that plan, and it was overwhelmingly adopted.

I do not expect the Minister to comment on a particular application, but I use this as an example. I have raised it in the House before, because I and the residents of Tettenhall have a real beef about it. The local neighbourhood plan set out certain parameters for how housing might be incorporated. The good people of Tettenhall are not opposed to new housing, just as the good people of Sutton Coldfield are not opposed to new housing—it just depends on where it is. Labour-controlled Wolverhampton City Council acceded to the demands of the local neighbourhood plan and the two wards in Tettenhall, which have between them six Conservative councillors, and to the surprise of some agreed that the planning application for the site known as the Clock House should not be given planning permission. It was refused by the city council. The developers, McCarthy & Stone—many Members will have come across them, with their retirement home juggernaut—then put in an appeal to Bristol. I am speaking now as a lay person, because I have not practised planning law for a very long time, but the planning inspector in Bristol totally ignored the local neighbourhood plan. He did not say, “We disagree with the local neighbourhood plan” or that “other factors override what is in the local neighbourhood plan.” The long written decision, which overturned the city council’s decision to reject and allowed the application to proceed, made almost no reference to the local neighbourhood plan.

5.15 pm

If new clauses 7 and 8 address that issue and it is in the spirit of what they provide for—I will be corrected if I am wrong—I hope that the Government can take it into account. This is not to say that local neighbourhood plans should be able to trump everything else, but they should be given due weight, not just by the local authority as the planning authority, but by the Planning Inspectorate.

One reason why I am raising this issue at some length today is that when I have raised it in oral questions and debates before, I have been told, “Well, the Neighbourhood Planning Bill is coming down the pipe, so raise the issue then.” Well, Minister, I am raising it, and I would like an answer. New clauses 7 and 8 offer a convenient peg on which to hang it. I am grateful to see the Minister nodding his head. I hope I will get an answer, perhaps not the one I want—because an answer would be helpful.
Graham Jones: My hon. Friend mentions that the Minister has said that a Bill is coming down the track, so I would like to draw attention to new clause 1. There is a Bill coming down the track, and we have an opportunity to include new clause 1 in it.

Rob Marris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Because that segues me nicely into the next and final section of my speech, which is about new clause 1. I hope that the Government will accept it, but if not, it looks as if we will have a Division tonight. I believe that new clause 1 is quite mildly worded, and the Minister may say that he accepts its spirit. As for the possible restriction on the rest of the Bill coming into force—that this provision might be a block, which was raised by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin)—if the Minister says to my hon. Friend that he agrees with the spirit of the provision and wants the guidance, but fears that it will act as a block, that would be great. In that case, I suspect that we will not have a Division. The Minister will guide us on that.

The content of new clause 1 seeks to have the Secretary of State “issue guidance”, not to make detailed rules about whether a betting shop or payday loan shop should be open in a given high street. If the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) visited his salutations yesterday, having been to school in the west midlands, and went back to Dudley borough, he would see the transformation there as in other black country boroughs in respect of clusters of payday loan shops and betting shops. Those clusters are not helpful to community cohesion, or to some of the most disadvantaged people in our society.

My hon. Friend and I have made it clear that, in asking the Government to issue guidance, we are not seeking to ban payday loan shops or betting shops, but to restrict the density of them. What seems to be happening—this is anecdotal; I have no statistical evidence to present—is that we are getting a clustering of such outlets in different areas, which is often, but not always, deleterious to those areas. We have an over-concentration of them. The same thing was happening, until the law was changed, with off-licences. Older Members might remember when getting a licence to sell alcohol was quite difficult because there was an unofficial density system operated by planning authorities. That went out the window, and every place—including petrol stations, for goodness’ sake—seemed to get licences to sell alcohol. We saw the same over-concentration with attendant social problems in some places, and we are rightly rowing back from that.

My hon. Friend wants guidance—I fully support him—so that we can row back from over-concentration of payday loan shops and betting shops. Part of this problem comes from a mistake made by the Labour Government, and some Back Benchers pointed out to them at the time that fixed odds betting terminals were bad news and should not be encouraged. I have to say, to my chagrin, that my own Government did not listen, just as they only partially listened—some longer-standing Members and you, Mr Speaker, will remember this—when they were pushing fixed odds betting terminals, and now we are five years on from that; time has passed and mistakes have been made. We need to tackle those mistakes today, not tomorrow, next week or next year.

Rob Marris: I agree with my hon. Friend. We need to learn from our mistakes, just as I hope any Labour Members who were on the Front Bench in 2005 when they were pushing fixed odds betting terminals have now done their mea culpas and recognised that they made a mistake then, because it is still rebounding on many urban constituencies around the country, including mine. We need to row back from that, but part of the mechanism, which is being reviewed, for doing so is not, and cannot be, the subject of this Bill. We can address another part of it, however: the over-concentration and the guidance which this Government ought responsibly to be issuing. They ought to have the statutory authority to do so within primary legislation, which is a reasonable measure put forward by my hon. Friend in new clause 1. I hope that the Minister can support the spirit of it, if not the exact wording.

Mr Jackson: I begin by declaring an interest: for six years I have been honorary vice-president of the Local Government Association. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on his amendment finding success in the other place. I also want to mention the doughty champion, the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), who, together with my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), has been very much at the sharp end of this important debate, as indeed I was at one time with my “stop the FOBTs” campaign in Peterborough city centre.

I ask the House to look at the wider context of the practical implications of new clauses 7 and 8, and also amendment 28 tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). We were all elected on a manifesto commitment to increase the supply of housing, and we all, I think, agree with the national consensus that we are in the middle of a housing crisis at present. We also need to look at this Bill within the wider context of generational fairness and social equity between those who own capital and those who wish to acquire capital. That is an important issue. I strongly welcome the likely publication in January of the housing White Paper and I hope that this important debate and Bill feed into that.

In that context, I draw the attention of the House to a useful paper published today by Daniel Bentley for the Civitas think-tank, “Housing supply and household growth, national and local”. It examines housing supply projections and puts a nominal figure on the real impact of the housing crisis. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) put his case in his usual erudite and well thought-through way, but my challenge to him and others is this: will their new clauses and amendments improve the position? The projected housing supply for the county of Sussex...
in 2015-16 did not even meet 50% of the figure for projected annual household formations from 2014 to 2039. Few local authorities are meeting those targets. Even the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has used the conservative figure of 220,000 new homes being needed to keep pace with population change over the period to 2039. Some estimates, including those in the paper, suggest that the figure may be as high as 330,000. I will not proceed down the path of discussing immigration, but, according to the Local Government Association, 49% of household formation over that period will come from net migration, so it is a big issue.

In 2015-16, we physically built only 163,940 new homes, although more were created through 5,000 conversions and 35,000 changes of use. In the 30 fastest-growing non-London local authorities only five managed to outstrip the difference between housing supply and housing growth by percentage increase: Dartford; Uttlesford; Aylesbury Vale; Slough; and Ashford. Of the 30 non-London local authorities with the highest population growth, in nominal terms only eight built enough houses to meet long-term need. While not perfect, the national planning policy framework has helped in some respects. Oxford, for example, has produced only 66% of its need based on population growth, but thanks to its duty to co-operate with other local authorities, such as South Oxfordshire District Council or Vale of White Horse District Council, it is meeting its targets on a sub-regional strategic housing level, which is good.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs and I have crossed swords before on the NPPF way back in 2012, but we must not put in the Bill a potentially wide-ranging and draconian measure that would effectively stymie the building and development of appropriate homes. We all have horror stories about the Planning Inspectorate. For example, the village of Eye near Peterborough was grossly overprovisioned with residential accommodation, with the inspectorate completely ignoring the hundreds of petition signatures, public meetings and so on, but we are where we are with the current system. Nevertheless, the NPPF already sets out the appropriate weight to be given to relevant policies between neighbourhood plans and the adoption and development of local plans, structure plans and site allocation plans.

New clause 7 would discriminate against local planning authorities that produce timely, robust local plans and that have adhered to the correct procedure for consultation, public inquiries and the Planning Inspectorate. We must bear it in mind that there might be an inadvertent consequence.

Mr Jackson: I pay tribute to the neighbourhood plans being produced by volunteers in my right hon. Friend’s constituency and throughout our country. They do an excellent job and I support the policy four-square. My point is about opportunity cost: is this approach going to have a detrimental effect on the Government’s strategic housing objective, which is to deliver large-scale housing for people who need it? When we look at the age of people buying their first house and at the availability or otherwise of affordable housing across the country, we see that this proposal has the potential to undermine the authority of the local planning authority to meet wider, long-term strategic housing and planning objectives. These things are already in place via the emerging or adopted local plan. The proposal will inevitably give rise to conflict between the local planning authority and the neighbourhood planning bodies, with the possible perverse consequence that we will see the establishment of neighbourhood planning bodies merely in order to thwart development.

Let me move on to deal quickly with new clause 8. I used the correct word “moratorium” in respect of the use by the Minister of development orders. On the specific issue of five-year land supply, again, this proposal seeks to put a draconian policy in the Bill, rather than, as I suggested in my intervention—my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs was generous in accepting interventions—waiting for a response from Government, by means other than primary legislation, to do as the LGA has suggested, which is to review the policy and look for a more consistent and better understood methodology for both developers and local authorities in respect of the policy under the current auspices of the national planning policy framework.

At the moment, we still have a robust system that tests the efficacy of five-year land supply through planning appeals and local plans. We should encourage greater incentives from local planning authorities. It is as well to make the point that, in some parts of the country, they lack the appropriate resources to carry out the proper work in that respect.

My final point is about amendment 28, which was tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield. I can understand the anger, passion and resentment that he articulated in his usual powerful way, but this is probably the most inappropriate amendment, because preventing payment of the new homes bonus when we already have strong protections in place for the green belt and other designated areas to prevent inappropriate development will have consequences.

Mr Mitchell: This may be my lack of understanding of planning matters, but can my hon. Friend explain how a Government who say they are committed to protecting the green belt then pay people a subsidy to build on the green belt, rather than paying them a bigger subsidy to build on brownfield sites, while protecting the green belt? Perhaps he can explain that conundrum.

Mr Jackson: My right hon. Friend makes a good point, but I am saying that we have less than benign financial circumstances and, were his policy to be followed, the city of Birmingham might lose £54 million in income through the new homes bonus. There are other ways in which we can toughen protections for the green belt,
while allowing discretion for some exceptional sites. I made the point in my intervention that 216,000 homes had already been placed in emerging and completed local plans in the green belt by March. I accept that there is a problem, but I am not convinced that this amendment will sort the issue out.

In reducing the income stream and funding to local planning authorities, the perverse ramification may well be that those hard-pressed authorities cannot therefore put in the effort to properly manage well-funded speculative developers with their land grabs. There might also be an impact on rural housing schemes, which are very important and necessary for many of my hon. Friends.

For those reasons, I ask my right hon. and hon. Friends—I think they have already acceded to my request—not to push these matters to a vote. Ministers will have heard the points that have been raised on both sides of the House and will correctly identify methods to ameliorate the problems that have been raised.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I rise to speak to new clause 2 tabled in my name and to support new clauses 7 and 8 tabled in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert).

The aim of new clause 2 is to permit the Secretary of State to impose what would in effect be penalty costs on appeal. My constituency of Eddisbury has a wealth of picturesque villages, located in the most beautiful settings and with excellent schools. These villages are now finding that they are the target of a large number of planning applications, which are often totally against the emerging or adopted neighbourhood plan.

In Cheshire West and Chester, which has a five-year land supply, the council has rightly turned down those applications as being against the local plan, yet developers persist in appealing. Local councils and the Planning Inspectorate have to spend valuable resources dealing with appeals that fall squarely against the ambitions and the principles of the neighbourhood plan.

My local parish councils, just like those in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs, have embraced neighbourhood planning. They have committed months of work—sometimes even years of work—to this and have relished the fact that they can bring forward a mix of housing that includes, for example, first-time starter homes as well as executive homes. They want to see starter homes, so that people can get on to the housing ladder and live in the community in which they have grown up, and they want to see smaller homes—bungalow-style homes—for the older people in my constituency who want to downsize. Given the part of Cheshire in which we live, developers invariably build five-bedroom executive homes. My local parish councils have relished the fact that they can plan for a mix of homes that allows for a varied community and enables people to remain in the community in which they have lived and grown up.

Like Arundel and South Downs, we have seen an increased offer and an increased acceptance of housing coming forward. None the less, we still see attempts by developers to drive a coach and horses through those neighbourhood plans. The aim of the new clause is to ensure that there is a financial disincentive in respect of appeals. It raises the prospect of a serious financial penalty for those developers seeking to have a go, as it was described in earlier contributions.

 Constituents feel that their rural villages are under siege and that, at every point, their wishes as expressed and adopted in neighbourhood plan are being ignored. The new clause seeks to allow the full recovery of costs, with an additional punitive element, where it is clear that the refusal has been on the basis of the application being against the local planning policy. These speculative appeals impact on local council resources, and developers constantly feel that they can effectively try to push and break the plan, and it is deeply frustrating.

Sir Nicholas Soames: My hon. Friend is speaking for many of us whose councils are constantly abused by the disgraceful behaviour of house builders. In my constituency—I intend to deal with the matter at some length—they have spent a very great deal of time and money trying to undermine the local plan.

Antoinette Sandbach: It becomes almost a war of attrition. The behaviour of developers appears to be designed to break local neighbourhood plans, so that they can drive through their ambitions, which ignore the wishes of local people and go against the commitment shown by local communities in producing those plans.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The hon. Lady is my constituency neighbour. As we are in the same part of Cheshire, I can confirm everything that she is saying. Does she share my concerns that, as things stand, planning law is stacked far too much in favour of the developers and that there are not enough tools in the armoury of local authorities and neighbourhood plans to resist them?

Antoinette Sandbach: That is the very reason that I tabled new clause 2. I wanted to give the Secretary of State an additional power in relation to costs when developers try to drive a coach and horses through neighbourhood plans. That is also why I support new clauses 7 and 8 tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I agree with much of what my hon. Friend says. When she drew up her new clause, did she think about encouraging the planning inspector to award costs to the local authority where the developer was turned down at appeal and the conditions in her new clause were met? I have one case in my constituency where the council had to pay the developer’s costs, even though the council had won.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. That seems a very strange case indeed. I am aware that councils often do not apply for costs and, when they do, they get only a proportion of their costs back, not their full costs. By tabling the new clause, I hope to give additional powers to rectify that position and to discourage developers from such behaviour.

The Minister will be aware that I have campaigned long on this issue because of the actions of developers in my constituency. I know that there are issues affecting the Cheshire East half of my constituency, which does not have a local plan. Where communities have worked
hard and put in place their neighbourhood plans, it is deeply frustrating for them to be put at risk because the methodology for calculating the five-year housing land supply was not correct. It seems ironic that Cheshire East used exactly the same methodology as Cheshire West and Chester, whose five-year land supply was accepted, yet that of Cheshire East was not. I can only assume that that is because there was no build-out of the housing that was described in earlier contributions.

I support new clause 8 because where a defect in the five-year supply is caused by the failure of developers to build out that causes the problem. The council has granted planning permission, but the developments are not being started. For those reasons, I support these new clauses.

Philip Davies: I should say in passing that I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on her new clause 2, and with my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) on new clause 7. I particularly agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on amendment 29. He is absolutely right and he may or may not know that I faced exactly the same situation in Bradford as he did in Sutton Coldfield. The Minister has put a stop on the core strategy plan of Bradford Council, but I hope for a much more favourable outcome from those deliberations than my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield received. I assure my hon. Friend the Minister that I will feel equally aggrieved should the decision be as it was in Birmingham.

I want to speak about new clause 1, and in doing so I should begin by referring people to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. The hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) made it clear once again that he is the biggest devotee in the House of Donald Trump. He quoted him, as he usually does, when he referred to fixed odds betting terminals as the “crack cocaine of gambling”. Anybody who knows anything about this subject knows that the term was first used by Donald Trump in the 1980s to refer to video keno games, which he saw as a threat to his casino businesses. Ever since he first used the phrase, any new form of gambling—in fact, every new form of gambling—has been referred to at various times as the “crack cocaine of gambling”. That has included casinos themselves at certain points and lottery scratchcards—name any form of gambling, and I can point to somebody who has called it the crack cocaine of gambling. So, of course, fixed odds betting terminals have been called the same—not because they are considered to be that, but just because the same old phrase is trotted out every time we have a new form of gambling.

5.45 pm

The hon. Gentleman talked about the massive public concern about these issues. I suspect, Mr Speaker, that if you were to go out on to the street and ask 1,000 people what their views of fixed odds betting terminals were, 999 would say, “What’s a fixed odds betting terminal?” In fact, when people in the House have been out knocking on doors in their constituencies at election time—those who do so—I wonder how many people have said to them, “Do you know, the main thing that concerns me is FOBTs. My vote at the election will be determined by your policy on FOBTs.” I suspect nobody in the House can put their hand on their heart and say that that has ever been their experience. So the idea that this is a massive social concern for the vast majority of our constituents is a—

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Philip Davies: No, I am going to press on. I will take some interventions in a bit, but I will press on, because other people wish to speak.

In his briefing notes on the new clause, the hon. Gentleman said he wanted to deal with the proliferation of betting shops. I know he would not want to mislead the House deliberately, so I will say charitably that he does not understand the meaning of the word proliferation. I will try to help him out. The dictionary defines proliferation as the rapid increase in the number of something. The hon. Gentleman is trying to tell us that we have a proliferation of betting shops. Well, the facts are the exact opposite.

The number of betting shops in the UK peaked in the mid-1970s, at about 16,000, and it has dropped since then. It was 9,128 in 2012. There are 8,709 this year. I suspect—in fact, I can virtually guarantee—that there will be fewer next year and fewer the year after that. There is not a proliferation of betting shops in this country; there is a reduction in the number of betting shops, and that reduction is getting steeper and steeper every year. These firms employ people, including lots of younger people and lots of women. I know that the Labour party no longer cares about working-class people, but when it did, these firms were an essential part of a working-class community.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Would my hon. Friend prefer the word “clustering”? I know he did when he was an esteemed member of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. In its report of 2012, it recognised the consequences of encouraging the clustering of betting shops and said that it was “a local problem which calls for a local solution.”

Does new clause 1 not want to empower people to use that local solution?

Philip Davies: No, the new clause is all about being against betting shops. It is a solution looking for a problem.

The reason there is concern about fixed odds betting terminals is a chap called Mr Derek Webb. The hon. Member for Hyndburn knows him very well, but for those who do not know him, he made millions—tens of millions and maybe even hundreds of millions—out of making gambling machines. When the Labour party allowed bookmakers in 2005 to introduce fixed odds betting terminals, Mr Derek Webb was so concerned that he wanted his machines to be installed in betting shops, and the bookmakers turned him down—probably the biggest mistake they have ever made in their business. So he has made it his business ever since to make sure that his machines cannot be in betting shops and people have to go to casinos where they are installed. That is basically what all this is about. It is, in effect, a rich
man’s grudge match. He has spent millions trying to get these machines out of betting shops for no other reason than vindictiveness; that is the long and short of it. He set up the Campaign for Fairer Gambling on the back of this issue. He has spent millions. He gave half a million pounds to the Lib Dems in the previous Parliament, trying to buy their support, and he has now started giving a great deal of money to the Labour party in the hope of buying some influence with it.

Graham Jones: What would be the hon. Gentleman’s comments on Channel 4’s exposé on “Dispatches” and on the BBC’s “Panorama” where people just made up fake news?

Philip Davies: That bears no relation to the facts. We all know that people can make a hour-long TV programme and portray anything in any way they want to if they are so determined.

Dr Poulter rose—

Philip Davies: I am going to press on if my hon. Friend does not mind.

These are the facts, whether people like them or not. The average time that somebody spends on a fixed odds betting terminal is about 10 minutes. Their average loss in that time is about £7. These machines make a profit of about £11 an hour; people may say that that is excessive, but I do not believe it is. The rate of problem-gambling in the UK has not altered one jot since fixed odds betting terminals were introduced—it is still about 0.6% of the population, as it was before. The biggest problem-gambling charity in the UK, the Gordon Moody Association, was established in 1971, 30-odd years before fixed odds betting terminals were even introduced in the UK. The idea that we will eliminate problem gambling by getting rid of fixed odds betting terminals is for the birds. People who have a gambling addiction will bet on two flies going up a wall if they get half a chance. The answer is to solve their addiction, not just to ban a particular product in a way that will make not one blind bit of difference.

In this House we have an awful lot of upper-class and middle-class people who like to tell working-class people how they should spend their money and how they should not spend their money.

Graham Jones rose—

Philip Davies: Well, if the cap fits—I give way the hon. Gentleman.

Graham Jones: I came here from a factory where I was on £10 an hour. I went straight from the factory into Parliament. I am not one of the middle-class or upper-class people the hon. Gentleman is talking about. Unlike him, I am one of the normal working-class people.

Philip Davies: It is a shame that the hon. Gentleman has become so detached from his roots, along with the rest of his party. Perhaps Labour would not be in such a mess if it stuck a bit more closely to its working-class roots.

I was astonished to hear my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) talk about all those people in West Dorset going from payday loan companies into betting shops. It is a while since I have been in West Dorset, but it has clearly changed an awful lot since the last time I was there.

Sir Oliver Letwin: My hon. Friend misunderstood me. My point was that I do not have this problem in leafy West Dorset: the places I have seen people go directly from payday lenders into betting shops are in inner-city areas, where there are people far harder pressed than most, though not all, of my constituents. That is the worry.

Philip Davies: I will be interested to find out about my right hon. Friend’s habit of spending lots of time in inner-city areas where he watches people’s activities going between betting shops and payday lending companies, but we can discuss that later.

Sir Oliver Letwin: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Philip Davies: No, I will not.

I did not come into Parliament to ban people from doing all the things that I do not happen to like myself. I think that our duty in this House is to try to protect people’s freedoms, even the freedom to do things that we do not choose to do ourselves. Unfortunately, there are lots of people in this House who do nothing other than try to ban people from doing all the things that they personally do not happen to like themselves. Many people in this House do not like gambling and betting, and want to stop anyone else doing it.

As I made clear in an intervention, there are far more pubs in poorer communities, per square mile, than betting shops. How many Members of this House want to restrict the number of pubs so that poor working-class people do not waste their money down at the pub? None, or hardly any. Why? Because MPs like a drink themselves, and they do not want to ban anybody from doing anything that they happen to like themselves. There are far more takeaway food outlets per square mile in poor working-class areas than there are betting shops. How many Members of this House want to ban all those takeaways? None. Why? Look at everyone—we all like a good takeaway ourselves, and do not want to do ourselves out of it. This is all about people in this House telling other people what they should and should not be doing in a rather patronising way that does not give a very good image of this place. They do not want to stop people doing things that they themselves like doing—only the things that they do not happen to like.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): My hon. Friend is putting a very sincere argument. I know he holds these views sincerely and his integrity is beyond question. I do not want him to ban anything he does not want to ban, but on this occasion I am happy to do it for him.

Philip Davies: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend.

If people are not allowed to bet on a fixed odds betting terminal, the idea that they will all of a sudden not bet at all is for the birds. What will they do? I will tell the House. They will go from the roulette machine in a betting shop, where staff are keeping an eye on them and intervening when they show concerning behaviours and referring them to problem-gambling
Rob Marris: I caution the hon. Gentleman on that point. I do not know what he did, but I remember that when I voted for the ban on smoking in workplaces, one argument put forward by opponents was that people would still continue to consume tobacco, and just do so in a different venue. That is manifestly not the case. The number of people giving up smoking or smoking less has increased very considerably because of that legislation. I am not saying that it is entirely due to the legislation, but the consensus among medical experts is that the legislation has been a major contributory factor in people’s abandoning or lessening personally harmful behaviour.

Philip Davies: The problem with the hon. Gentleman’s argument is that smoking has gone down in this country every single year, without fail, since 1975—every single year, without fail, whether before or after the smoking ban. It was therefore inevitable that after a ban on smoking it would go down, because it would have gone down if there had been no ban. That cause and effect argument does not wash with me, I am afraid. People who bet will go on to the internet.

To give another argument, The Times had an article based on information from the Gambling Commission showing that 16% of under-16s were gambling every week. What were they gambling on? It was not fixed odds betting terminals—they were not going into betting shops. They were gambling on fruit machines, and largely on national lottery scratchcards. People can purchase those scratchcards at 16. They can gamble at 16 on the national lottery.

Who argues against that in this House—who argues against young people getting into gambling at the age of 16 like that? I do. I think it is an absolute outrage that people can play the national lottery at 16. If we believe that gambling should be allowed only at 18, that should be the case for all gambling. But who is arguing against playing the lottery at 16? No one. Even though young people are getting into gambling on scratchcards, people do not complain. That is not because they care about the people losing money; it is because they are concerned about the people winning the money. The money from the lottery goes to good causes, so people think it is fine for others to get an addiction to scratchcards. Although they do not like to say so, and so dress it up by saying they are concerned about problem gamblers, the fact is that what lies behind measures such as the new clause is that people do not like the people who are winning the money. They do not give a stuff about the people who are losing the money. That is the sad thing.

How much did Derek Webb give to problem-gambling charities when he was accumulating his hundreds of millions of pounds? Perhaps he did give some money, but I am not aware of anything. The bookmakers give millions and millions—about £6 million a year—to problem-gambling charities to help people with their treatment, and that would be under threat if we did away with these betting shops.

6 pm
I know my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) cares a great deal about the racing industry, and every single betting shop in this country gives £30,000 in picture rights to racing. Every shop that closes means £30,000 less for the racing industry, which employs an awful lot of people. The proposal will have unintended consequences.

New clause 1 is a solution looking for a problem, and it is motivated by people who are simply against gambling. They do not like gambling and they do not like betting shops. That is fair enough, and it is a perfectly respectable position to hold, but they should at least be honest about it and about the motivation behind the new clause. It is not about problem gamblers. There will be problem gamblers whether we have fixed-odds betting terminals or not, and we must do everything we can to help those individuals to get out of the mess that they are in with their lives. Problem gambling will be solved by treatment, education and research, not by getting rid of a product or targeting betting shops because we do not happen to like them. Most people in here have probably never even been into a betting shop and met the customers, but that does not stop Members spouting on about something that they know next to nothing about.

The hon. Member for Hyndburn talked about the clustering of betting shops on the high street. The fact of the matter is that a person can only go into one shop at a time, and the fact that there are two, three, four or five shops on a high street does not make that person more or less of a problem gambler. Whether there is one shop or five makes absolutely no difference to problem gamblers, and it is absolute nonsense to suggest that it does.

Fiona Bruce: Is it not correct to say that betting shop managers have an obligation to stop a gambler if they think that that person is gambling irresponsibly, and therefore there is a reason why we should stop the proliferation of betting shops in the same locality?

Philip Davies: The problem with that is something that used to be called competition, which the Conservative party used to be in favour of, many moons ago. I know that it is an old-fashioned view in the Conservative party to believe in competition, but some of us still do. Self-exclusion for people who have a problem now applies across different betting shops. If someone self-excludes in one shop, it will apply in every shop in the locality, so I think my hon. Friend’s concern has been allayed.

The point I want to make before I finish is that if the choice was between having a betting shop in a town centre—in Bradford or in Shipley, for example—or having Marks & Spencer or Next, I would say every single time that the local authority should look to give planning permission to Marks & Spencer or Next, because it would do much more to regenerate the high street in Shipley than another betting shop would. Absolutely—I would be with the hon. Member for Hyndburn, every single day of the week. But the reason why betting shops have gone from the side streets to the

[Philp Davies]
main street is that retailers have been abandoning the high street—they have been walking away from it. The choice is now whether we have a betting shop or a closed-down, boarded-up shop down the high street. It is not a choice between a betting shop and a wonderful retailer that will do this, that and the other to the local community; it is often a choice between a betting shop and no shop whatsoever.

I would say that in a local community it is far better to have a betting shop employing people, and looking out for people who are gambling to make sure that they do not bet with a problem, than to have a boarded-up shop, which is the alternative. The Government should be very wary about doing something that will further reduce the number of betting shops when it is already going down, even without any intervention. I hope that the House will support my hon. Friends with their new clauses but reject new clause 1.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Members might be relieved to know that I shall be extremely brief. I rise to speak to my amendments 24 and 25, although I should say that there is not a new clause or an amendment that we have heard about today that I disagree with. I thank the many Members on both sides of the House who have supported my amendments.

My hon. Friends will know that I am a passionate champion of the vulnerable. I have often spoken about disability and social care issues, and today is no exception. I doubt that anyone in the House would disagree that secure, affordable and appropriate housing is a basic requirement for everyone. I also doubt that many would disagree that we face an unprecedented housing challenge. When the supply of housing is tight, some in society must make do with seriously inappropriate housing. I am pleased to report that 90% of all new housing developments in London must meet building standards category 2, which concerns accessible standards, and that the remaining 10% must be totally wheelchair-friendly. That is fantastic and exactly as it should be, but no similar requirement applies outside London.

My amendments would require local planning authorities to consider the needs of elderly and disabled people when identifying strategic priorities for the development and use of land. They would support the national policy guidance on new developments outlined in the national planning policy framework. They would also, by enabling independent living, support the Government’s commitment to halving the disability employment gap. Furthermore, they would reduce pressure on the social care sector and the NHS by providing more suitable accommodation for elderly people and keeping them safe in their homes for longer. In itself, achieving that is one of the biggest challenges that this country faces, and we have talked an awful lot about it recently.

The Government are tackling the housing challenge head-on. I look forward to the imminent White Paper, but as we rise to this challenge, we must not inadvertently replace it with a different kind of challenge by failing to recognise the need for accessible housing. My amendments purely seek to safeguard against that.

With an ageing population and more people living longer, with complex needs, the demand for accessible homes is set to increase rapidly. By 2030, the number of people aged 65 and over will have increased by 50%. In the next 20 years, the number of disabled people is set to increase from 11 million to 15 million. Estimates—conservative estimates at that—show that 3 million more accessible homes will be needed by 2035. Today, we have 11.9 million disabled people in the UK, yet only 6% of the housing stock currently provides the four bare-minimum standards needed to allow a disabled person to visit, let alone live there. The number of people aged 85 and over is expected to double in the next 23 years to more than 3.4 million.

Older people should be able to live safely and with dignity in good-quality, warm and safe housing. We know that most older people want to retain their independence and to stay in their homes for as long as possible. Not only should we actively support that, but if we want to tackle the crisis in social care—it is a crisis—we must do so. The cost of hospitalisation and social care for older people, such as those who have suffered hip fractures, most of which are caused by falls but could be prevented if there was more suitable housing, is £2 billion a year.

Dr Poulter: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Most older people live outside London, and the demographics of local authority areas show that a higher proportion of older people live outside the metropolitan areas, which is particularly important in relation to her amendments. The preventive measures she mentions are an important aspect of social care. Will she elaborate a bit more about how early intervention could save money for the NHS and the social care system?

Heidi Allen: Absolutely. I see that particularly in my constituency of South Cambridgeshire, which has one of the fastest growing elderly populations. We are spending money hand over fist by acting after the event. If we can keep people safe in their homes, it does not take a genius to see, given the pressures on the NHS at the moment—hip fractures alone cost us £2 billion a year—that there are hundreds of ways in which the money could be better spent.

The amendments could have a far-reaching impact. Research by charities such as the Papworth Trust and Habinteg shows that disabled people who have a home that works for them are four times more likely to be in paid employment. If we are as serious as I believe we are about halving the disability employment gap, we need to get serious about these amendments.

I have highlighted the issues that every Member of this House knows we face and the impact that the lack of accessible housing is having and will continue to have on our economy and, more importantly, on our society. My amendments would impose no additional cost on the Government. Indeed, they would save the Government, and thus the taxpayer, a huge sum. All they ask is that we put into law the guidance already provided in the NPPF.

All I am asking is that planning authorities must consider the needs of the whole population. What arguments against the amendments could there possibly be? I do not accept that they will place an additional burden on developers, and thus a cost on the consumer. The additional cost of making a home accessible from the outset is absolutely minimal. Having run my own manufacturing business, I know how powerful competitive necessity can be to drive costs down.
James Heappey (Wells) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an important point about the affordability and accessibility of a property in which people are to live. Will she include in the examination of homes in what she is encouraging developers and local authorities to consider so that elderly people can live in homes that are warm as well as accessible?

Heidi Allen: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. This is all about thinking about things before we have to fit them retrospectively. It is vital that we have warm and efficient homes that save money for elderly people.

Some might argue that if central Government agreed to legislate through my amendments, that would take power away from local authorities. However, the amendments would not remove any local power at all; if anything, they would bolster it.

National demographic changes are happening now. We need more accessible housing and I believe that we have an opportunity to act now. This is about how we make this country one that truly works for everyone.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I have been bullied by the Whips into making only a very short intervention, so I am not able to expand on the extensive views that I wished to favour the House with. However, I thought that I should not let the moment pass without my thanking my hon. Friend. The Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for his immensely touching description of betting shops, which, as we all know, are havens of peace, tranquility, excitement and—

Philip Davies: Virtue.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Yes, virtue. They are great places to be, and they make a tremendous and important contribution to the money-lending business. I say to my hon. Friend that he was extremely patronising about my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) who, like myself, has probably spent many, many happy hours in gambling shops, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley knows I have. I have nothing but the very highest opinion of them. My hon. Friend gave us a particularly touching exposition and I hope the House will pay no attention to it.

I thank my hon. Friend the Housing and Planning Minister for his courtesy, kindness and consideration, and for the immense efforts he makes on behalf of all of us to try to ensure that we have a fair planning system in this country.

I, of course, support amendment 28, which was tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) who, like myself, has probably spent many, many happy hours in gambling shops, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley knows I have. I have nothing but the very highest opinion of them. My hon. Friend gave us a particularly touching exposition and I hope the House will pay no attention to it.

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I am really speaking to support my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), who is my close friend and parliamentary neighbour. He and I are currently struggling as Mid Sussex District Council is undergoing an examination in public. As my hon. Friend the Minister knows, Mid Sussex has made 14 parish and town council plans, which is something of a record. That is an extraordinary achievement. The local communities have worked immensely hard, with great credibility and integrity, only to find that all their efforts are constantly undermined and challenged by the most unscrupulous building lobby it has ever been my pleasure to have to deal with.

At the examination in public, at which my right hon. Friend and I appeared on the second day, I was astonished to see the range of what the builders produced. They had bogus development forums that had been rushed together to try to present them as reputable. Their lobbying is aggressive and, in my view, totally unacceptable. Even our local enterprise partnership is chaired by a builder. They seek to interfere, very unhelpfully, in the work of the planning authorities.

My hon. Friend the Minister knows of the infamous application by Mayfield Market Towns to build a completely unwanted new settlement to the south of my constituency and partially in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs. It has been turned down time after time. No one wants it and it is not in any plan, yet the builders continue to chip away at the fabric, integrity and credibility of the plans.

In supporting the very sound and sensible new clauses tabled by my right hon. Friend, all I wish to say to the Minister is that I hope he understands that councils such as Mid Sussex are fighting a losing battle. There need to be clear rules and a clear understanding that there is a spirit that is entered into, because at the moment the house builders act quite outside the spirit and intention of the law. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) said in her excellent speech, it is quite unacceptable that all this hard work is undone by some completely unacceptable lobbying.

6.15 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I am pleased to follow my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames). I rise to support the provisions in the Bill that will identify and build the houses that the country and my constituents badly need, and to speak in support of new clause 7.

The Bill addresses many key areas to help to deliver the home building agenda. However, speeding up the delivery of homes and increasing their number should not inevitably come at the cost of valuable green-belt land. Unfortunately, the draft Greater Manchester spatial framework, which is currently under consultation, relies heavily on the release of green-belt land, particularly in my constituency, with more than 8,000 houses planned on Cheadle’s green belt. My residents, especially in areas where neighbourhood plans are in progress, are extremely concerned about that. We have ambitious home building targets, but when delivering new homes, we must look at the long-term sustainability of development, rather than offering up our green spaces for easy wins for developers. We must be ambitious, direct development strategically and with a coherent vision, and value local community involvement.

Thousands of people have contacted me to raise their concerns about this issue, and I will be presenting a petition to the House later today that shows the strength of feeling in my constituency about protecting the green belt for the next generation while demonstrating the importance of local voices being heard.
It is evident that people care about their local communities. They want to see urban areas regenerated, and they love their open and rural spaces, and recognise their value for physical and mental health and wellbeing. People in Cheadle not only care about the place where they live, but want to help to shape it and to have their views heard. They want to have their say not only as individuals but in groups, such as Save Heald Green Green Belt and the Woodford Neighbourhood Forum. I want to make sure that they have their voices heard, too.

We should be proud of our record of encouraging and enabling community engagement through our localism agenda. The opportunity to help to shape the village of Woodford was taken up wholeheartedly by residents, who set up their neighbourhood forum in October 2013. Since then, the members and residents have raised funds and spent thousands of hours working on their local plan. Getting a local plan together is no mean feat. Over the past three years, they have put together a residents questionnaire and a neighbourhood plan scoping report, and they have held a neighbourhood plan exhibition. They have produced an interim analysis of data for 2015, an annual progress report, a landscape and environment studies report, a housing needs assessment, a movement study, and a heritage and character assessment. They have worked tremendously hard and know every inch of their area. They are now consulting village residents on the plan and reaching the pre-submission phase, which is a critical point in the plan’s progress.

I want to encourage more residents to get involved in that way. However, an obstacle to the uptake of the opportunity for groups to put together neighbourhood plans is the perception that plans can be overturned by local planning authorities, especially if they have not reached the final stage or if the local planning authority cannot demonstrate a five-year land supply. Communities need reassurance that neighbourhood plans are given due weight in planning considerations, and that all the hard work that goes into them will be rewarded and given proper consideration.

The Bill gives us an opportunity to give our green belt further protection for years to come, and to encourage more people to get involved in neighbourhood forums to develop and shape their area. I look forward to the publication of the Government’s White Paper in due course. On my Christmas card this year, I have featured the green belt at Woodford, which I look out over. I hope that, in future years, I will be able to include it on my card again.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have a few more speakers and there is another group to get through after this one. The quicker we can move on, the better.

Fiona Bruce: I rise to speak in support of new clauses 7 and 8, to which I have added my name, but I am spurred by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) to put on record my support for the tenor of new clause 1.

It is imperative that Ministers act to restore the confidence of my Congleton constituents in the status of neighbourhood plans specifically and in localism more widely. My constituents consider that the status and application of neighbourhood plans is confusing, contradictory, inconsistent and unfair. The area has no local plan and no agreed five-year planned supply. For years, local communities in my constituency have been bombarded with a barrage of inappropriate planning applications by developers gobbling up green spaces, including prime agricultural land, and putting pressure on local schools, health services, roads and other services. It is essential that Ministers take action to give neighbourhood plans the full weight in practice that the Government say they have in theory. It is for that reason that residents in my constituency have in some cases taken years to prepare neighbourhood plans. I respect the Government’s good intentions, but they are not being carried out.

The Government factsheet on the Bill states: “Neighbourhood planning gives communities direct power to develop a shared vision for their neighbourhood and shape the development and growth of their local area. For the first time communities can produce plans that have real statutory weight in the planning system.”

That is the theory, but let me tell hon. Members about the practice. The parish of Brereton was the first area in my constituency to produce a neighbourhood plan. It is a rural farming area mainly—just 470 houses are dotted about it. It developed a neighbourhood plan over many years, and it was voted in with a huge 96% majority vote on a 51% turnout. It is a very intelligent document. It has no blanket objection to development, but does say that development should be appropriate in scale, design and character of the rural area of Brereton, and that it should not distort that character. It says that small groups of one or two properties built over time would be appropriate, supporting the rural economy and providing accommodation for those with local livelihoods, which seems reasonable.

I warmly welcomed the plan when it was produced and when it was adopted. However, the Brereton example is one of several in which planning applications that are contradictory to the best intentions of local residents have been approved by the inspectorate. Brereton is a parish of 470 houses. Within the last month, one development of no fewer than 190 houses has been allowed on appeal. Another application for 49 houses is coming down the track. That is more than half the size again of the parish.

Brereton has very few facilities—for example, it does not have a doctors’ surgery—so nearby Holmes Chapel will be pressurised further. That village already has hundreds of recently built properties or properties for which permission has been given. The health centre is full, the schools are under pressure and traffic pressures render roads dangerous. Unlike Brereton, Holmes Chapel has not yet completed its local neighbourhood plan, but people there are now asking whether it is worth the time and effort of completing one.

The position is the same in Goostrey, another nearby village that is in the process of developing its neighbourhood plan. A resident and member of the Goostrey parish council neighbourhood plan team wrote to me. He says that such decisions are demotivating when it comes to creating neighbourhood plans, and that they make encouraging people to get involved in the Goostrey plan much harder—he refers not only to the Brereton decision, but to the inconsistency of two recent decisions
down the road in Sandbach, where one application for a substantial housing development was dismissed based on the neighbourhood plan, and another, cheek-by-jowl down the road, was approved with the neighbourhood plan carrying little or no weight, even though there was no five-year housing supply in both cases.

I have been told by local residents that what really offended people in Brereton was the fact that

"at the public examination of the Brereton Neighbourhood Plan in November 2015 at Sandbach Town Hall, the Examiner insisted our Plan and its policies were sufficiently robust to counteract mass housing development and protect the rural character of the Parish. He asserted publicly that Brereton, as a rural Parish, did not have a responsibility to provide mass housing towards the wider strategic housing target—yet, the Appeal Inspectorate essentially has argued the complete opposite. Why are Government representatives involved in planning matters holding completely opposing and inconsistent views?"

Another resident in yet another parish who has worked for almost two years with neighbours to develop a neighbourhood plan area designation has now resigned from the steering group, in what the constituent calls “total disillusionment”, saying:

“I do not understand how this decision is either fair or reasonable...I conclude that the Neighbourhood Planning Process is a Government-sponsored confidence trick”.

Those are strong words, but they express how many of my constituents feel. Another said that

“there seems little point in producing a neighbourhood plan if it is considered irrelevant.”

Fiona Bruce: That is what I am saying. Time and again, our constituents are being encouraged to produce neighbourhood plans. About two years ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), then a Minister in the Department for Communities and Local Government, came at my invitation to Sandbach town hall to talk to residents concerned about the barrage of applications by developers to build thousands of houses across my constituency. He said that the way to protect our local communities was by developing neighbourhood plans. That galvanised communities such as those that I have mentioned into working towards neighbourhood plans. As others have said, some residents have put hundreds of hours into doing so.

James Heappey: My hon. Friend describes a situation that I am sure we all recognise well. In my experience, many local communities engage positively with their neighbourhood and local plans to identify the housing need in their area, and then plan accordingly. Does she share my frustration, however, that because of the robust protections afforded to the Bristol and Bath green belt to the north of my constituency, despite my communities having made plans in Somerset, much of the former’s housing demand is being displaced southwards, so we end up having to absorb that as well, outwith our planning?

Fiona Bruce: I do very much empathise with my hon. Friend’s concerns.

Another resident says that unless neighbourhood plans are given significant weight—that is what I and many colleagues have asked the Minister to ensure—their community

“would advise others not to put the time and effort into what is increasingly looking like a futile and wasteful exercise”.

Another resident pointed out that the factsheet I referred to states, in response to the question,

“should a community produce a neighbourhood plan where the Local Plan may not be up-to-date?”,

that through

“a neighbourhood plan, communities can have a real say about local development...and protect important local green spaces”.

It also states that

“the NPPF is very clear that where a planning application conflicts with a neighbourhood plan that has been brought into force, planning permission should not normally be granted (NPPF para. 198)”. Contradictorily, in the case of Brereton, the inspector’s report allowing the appeal for these 190 houses stated:

“Reference was made to paragraph 198 of the Framework, which provides that where a planning application conflicts with a neighbourhood plan (as in this case)—he acknowledged that—

“that has been brought into force, planning permission should not normally be granted”.

So far, so good. It goes on to say:

“However, the position is not ‘normal’ in that as NP policy HOU01 is clearly a relevant policy for the supply of housing, and is in conformity with LP policies which are themselves out of date”—meaning there is no current neighbourhood plan—

“only limited weight can be afforded to the policy”.

6.30 pm

As my residents are saying, it looks as though the Department is saying that an application that conflicts with a neighbourhood plan would result in refusal of a planning permission, even though a local plan is not up to date—that is in the factsheet—but the Planning Inspectorate is saying that a neighbourhood plan can be given only limited weight for the very reason that the local plan is out of date.

In conclusion, I ask Ministers to clarify the weight—the actual weight—to be given to made neighbourhood plans in the absence of a local plan, and also to provide increased weight to a draft plan because of the stage it has reached. Many of these communities that are now in the process of developing plans have become disillusioned, as I said. There are many months still to go before their plans can be finalised, and they want to know whether it is worth continuing.

Let me finally ask if we could have a fairer methodology for calculating a deliverable five-year land supply, because the head of planning strategy at Cheshire East Council has confirmed to me:

“If we could count all our current permissions, the Borough would have a 5-year supply as things stand.”

But things do not stand there because the problem arises from the fact that developers do not build out. They are tardy, and they are deliberately tardy because they simply want to get more and more permissions. They are, as colleagues have said, gaming the system.
Richard Drax: It is a pleasure to participate in the debate, and, with a mainly rural constituency, I felt I must. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) on their contributions. I entirely concur with them and share their concerns on this important issue.

Let me touch briefly—I, too, have been got at by the Whips, which is unusual for me; I have not been got at in six years, but I have been today, so I shall not be long—on regionalism, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield brought up, and localism. As I am addressing my remarks to the planning Minister, for whom I have a huge amount of respect and who is doing a wonderful job, I would also like to touch briefly on housing density.

To look at this from a more macro point of view, my concern is that we will be here for many years to come, because planning has always been a complicated issue. With the pressures on immigration—no one should get me wrong: I am all for controlled immigration—and with a net immigration of 340,000, that means that something comparable to the population of the city of Leeds, with a population of 750,000, is settling in the country about every two years.

There are pressures on us all in this House, and they are going to increase—not just in our urban areas, but in our beautiful rural areas such as South Dorset. I entirely concur with my right hon. Friend. The Member for Sutton Coldfield that we must look at planning, and housing in particular, in a far more regional and holistic way. Local people entirely support the neighbourhood plans, which I think are a very good idea—as long as they are going to work, of course. Local plans must be respected and must have some statutory weight, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton said. A reasonable holistic approach is going to be far more pragmatic and sensible if, for example, a region with an urban and rural area can decide where the jobs, the hospitals, the roads and all the different parts of infrastructure are. All too often, these do not come with proposals by developers because, of course, that costs money. Moving on briefly to localism, the opinion of local people must, of course, be sought, because that is going to be crucial.

Conservative Members must be very careful, I remember cursing Labour’s regional spatial strategy until I was blue in the face, but I think we are in danger of not listening to local people who have genuine concerns. This is nowhere more appropriate than in my part of the world in Purbeck. As I hinted to my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), I think we need more clarity on the rules and regulations governing where houses should be built. Quite apart from all the local people, who are consulted, we have the officers, who in many cases do not seem to understand what the planning regulations mean or interpret them wrongly. There are the over-enthusiastic officers who get it completely wrong, and vice versa. Then of course there are our dear councillors on all sides of the political divide, who are doing their best, but they are human beings and often make mistakes. They may make decisions for political reasons. There are all kinds of factors that we in this House know lead councillors to make decisions, and they might not always be the right ones.

Local people in Langton Matravers in my constituency know exactly who needs to have a house: it must be affordable—and I mean affordable—and they know best where to place it. They do not need to be told by planning inspectors, whom everyone is terrified of, that they must have hundreds of homes on the edge of their beautiful village, which in effect almost turns it into a sort of ghetto and ruins the reason millions of people come to our beautiful constituencies. This clearly is absolute madness.

I know other Members wish to speak and the Government want to move on, but finally I wish to make a plea on density and style of housing. I have a friend in north Yorkshire who is a landowner and who has developed truly affordable proper homes—affordable homes for rent, which is equally important as homes to buy. The following point is crucial. In too many housing developments, particularly in rural areas, there is no area for children: the cars are parked on the street, the dustbins are at the front doors, there are no green fields to run out and have fun on.

Sir Nicholas Soames: My hon. Friend is making a very important point. One of the things I have been horrified by in following this examination in public is that here are these builders proposing building hundreds of houses over what is already a very substantial target, which the council has agreed to, and they have made no mention at all of infrastructure. How can anyone accept that?

Richard Drax: My right hon. Friend represents a beautiful constituency like mine and speaks eloquently, and I entirely concur with him, as I am sure we all do. I make a plea to the Government to look at some form of legislation to ensure that developers have a duty to develop responsibly and in ways whereby they treat people and families as human beings, not animals trapped in a cage where they cannot go outside and children cannot roam without annoying the neighbours. This will lead to social breakdown, as we have seen across the country in many areas, and the worst examples lead to more social incohesion, which is the last thing we need.

Mr Burrowes: It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to speak briefly to new clause 1 and amendments 24 and 25, which are both moderate amendments.

We have had a debate about betting shops and FOBTs, but Mr Deputy Speaker is giving great latitude to the discussion on new clause 1, because FOBTs and betting are the responsibility of another Department. This is essentially about the tools in relation to licensing and the welcome review. We have heard the warm-up act from my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). His speech can be rehearsed again when we come to the outcome, which hopefully will show evidence of the significant harm that is being done, particularly to the most vulnerable people.

I am not so concerned about the Derek Webb’s of this world or the motivations of hon. Members on the Whips. I am concerned about the vulnerable people who are certainly being preyed upon, particularly in deprived communities, and especially as a result of the clustering of betting shops. There is good evidence from
the Local Government Association that in areas of clustering there is increased problem gambling. We cannot avoid that evidence. New clause 1 seeks to deal with clustering.

It is just one tool. The number of betting shops, the number of those betting, and indeed those going to payday loan companies, are thankfully being reduced because of other regulatory measures. The 2015 regulatory interventions on payday loans were very welcome, and have had an impact. The additional taxation of gaming machines has also had an impact on the number of betting shops.

These are all tools at the Government’s disposal, but we are discussing planning tools and whether they are fit for purpose. In London there are local plans in Enfield and elsewhere—the borough plans that take account of impact on amenity, concentration of similar uses, security, locality and proximity to sensitive uses. That is all welcome. The previous Mayor of London also focused in his plan on the over-concentration of betting shops and prepared and issued the 2014 supplementary planning guidance. It recognised the urgent need to enable local planning authorities to control the proliferation of betting shops and to address implications of retaining the viability and vitality of town centres while protecting amenity and safety.

Governments, local councils and neighbourhood plans are all on this journey, but all of us in this place may not be on the same journey. There has been good cross-party support for the concerns about clustering, but is that adequate? Control, not least of clustering, is insufficient across the board and across the country, and we must consider the available opportunities. That is what new clause 1 is about. It provides for an assessment when an increase in the number of betting shops or payday lenders is proposed to ensure that deleterious impacts of clustering are prevented.

In many ways, the new clause pulls together the elements of the journey that the Government are on, and I look forward to hearing the Minister welcome the principles behind it. If he is unwilling to support it this time around, taking account of the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) about blocking, I hope he recognises that there are good intentions across the House. When the review of fixed odds betting terminals is published, if there is evidence of significant harm, I hope the Government will do what is already within their power and issue appropriate guidance. It matters that betting shops are sadly disproportionately affecting vulnerable people. There is something in the fact that the poorest 55 boroughs have more than twice as many betting shops as the most affluent 115 boroughs. There needs to be an appropriate local dimension so that those poorer boroughs have the Government behind them, backing them up with local plans. I am supportive of new clause 1, but I will not join the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) in the Lobby tonight. I want the Government to be true to their word and take appropriate action and issue guidance at the appropriate time, such as when we hear back from the licensing review.

I support amendments 24 and 25—two welcome and moderate amendments from my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen). She is somewhat radical on occasions, but they are moderate and simply state what we all no doubt want to ensure. When we consider new building and the current and future projections in our areas, we must take account of the entire population, older and disabled people in particular. The amendments make sense and fit with the Government’s agenda of integrating social care and with the Green Paper about integration across Departments. It is projected that over-65 households will represent almost half of all household growth up to 2026, so getting housing right for older people will have immense benefits for society and the economy. When we ask our local authorities about new higher accessibility standards, the number of retirement housing developments, easy access to public transport and other local services and facilities, home adaptations, disabled facilities grants, and proper and appropriate housing support services in sheltered housing, these amendments will give that real teeth and ensure that what we all want does happen. I look forward to the Minister’s positive response.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful for catching your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker. So troublesome am I that three Whips, including one who is sitting next to me, have encouraged me to be brief, so I will do just that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): It is in your hands.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: It is in my hands. The Whips will see whether their spell has worked.

I start by welcoming my hon. Friend the Planning Minister. He has been incredibly generous in listening to Back-Bench concerns about planning. Having practised in it as a chartered surveyor, I know that it is an incredibly difficult area. The Bill is important, because neighbourhood plans were introduced by the Localism Act 2011—the clue is in the name—and if we can devise planning down as far as possible, many people will feel that they have ownership of the planning system and be much happier about what is being done to them. In contrast to some Members who have spoken in this debate, I warmly welcome such plans, and the Bill is a good step forward. New clauses 7 and 8 and amendments 19 and 28, which are in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), all represent improvements to the Bill.

We must ensure that neighbourhood plans work, and we need three things to do that. I represent two local authorities, Stroud District Council, which has a local district plan, and Cotswold District Council, which does not, and I have been pretty strong in my words about the latter. The net result in the Cotswold District Council area is that we do not have a single neighbourhood plan in operation.

6.45 pm

I have here a neighbourhood plan; this has 50 or 60 pages of hugely detailed stuff prepared by Fairford Town Council, dealing with not only where houses go, but a host of other aspects such as infrastructure, bus routes and community facilities. It contains a huge range of things, so it is a really good thing to get local people thinking about these plans. They cannot do that, however, unless they have a local plan in place; although they can, theoretically, produce a neighbourhood plan, they need a local plan in place. I therefore urge that we get on to local councils to get one in place.
The second thing that needs to be done is to make sure that the five-year land supply can be controlled by the local authority. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier) has made clear, the local planning system is a system of development, not of building. Therefore, if a developer plays the system and does not develop one site but gets planning permission for another, that can throw the system. I am grateful for the Minister's written statement today, which protects the situation until this Bill comes into effect. Indeed, it goes further in some respects than the Bill, because it protects some aspects of a three-year land supply, so I am grateful for what he has done.

If we do not have confidence in the neighbourhood planning system, we will not get any of the 130 towns and villages that I represent in my huge constituency, where 80% is designated as an area of outstanding natural beauty, to produce a neighbourhood plan. Planning is as difficult in the Cotswolds as it is anywhere in the country, and if we want them to produce these neighbourhood plans, which, as others have said, are difficult, detailed, costly and time-consuming for these volunteers, we need to have confidence in the system. In order for that to happen, these plans must work and stand up to scrutiny, and where a local plan and a neighbourhood plan are in operation, it should be de rigueur that the planning inspector does not overturn them, as happened in Kingswood, in the Stroud constituency. Fortunately, this Bill would rectify that, because Kingswood's neighbourhood plan was at an advanced stage of preparation but was not actually adopted. Just to show hon. Members how neighbourhood plans should work, let me point out that in many cases well over 50%, and often 60%, vote for these neighbourhood plans in referendums, so they are very popular. As has been said by a number of others, they bring forward more houses, because when people buy in to the system, they tend to want to adopt more houses. So I think this is an excellent Bill and I commend the Minister for what he has done.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Given the lateness of the hour, even though we have a number of amendments in this group, I will speak only to amendments 7 and 8, and to confirm our support for a few others. Amendment 7 would allow the full recovery of costs by local authorities for assisting with the development of a neighbourhood plan. We know that planning departments are massively under-resourced and that they are hugely important in getting the housing that we so desperately need built. I wholeheartedly agree with the Minister that if we want to build the housing we need, we must make sure that planning departments are adequately resourced. I therefore hope he will bring forward something beyond simply allowing local authorities to charge higher fees to resource planning departments properly.

Amendment 8 requires the Secretary of State to prioritise deprived communities when making available financial assistance to support the development of neighbourhood plans. Again, we discussed this in Committee, and if we are really serious about ensuring that all communities across the country are able to produce neighbourhood plans, deprived communities need to be supported in that endeavour and funded properly to produce such a plan. I wish also to put on the record the fact that we support amendments 24, 25 and 29 and new clauses 7 and 1, the latter having been tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones).

Gavin Barwell: In contrast with the first group of amendments, where we had a short debate on technical issues, this group has cut to the heart of our planning system, and I hope the House will bear with me, as I have a large number of amendments to respond to. Of the official Opposition amendments, I will respond only to the ones the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) spoke to, as I know the Opposition are keen for us to get on to the third group.

I start very quickly with four Government amendments. Three minor and technical amendments, 17, 18 and 19, are required to remove unnecessary duplication between clauses 10 and 11. Amendment 22 to clause 22 amends the commencement provision so that it no longer refers to the duplicated Bill in clause 11. If the House will take me at my word on that, I will move on to the more substantive issues. I will take them in the order in which they were raised in the debate.

Speaking to new clause 1, the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), and my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) spoke movingly about problems caused by the proliferation—my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) begged to differ on that word—or clustering of betting shops in their communities. Their concerns are not just limited to the planning system, but they rightly looked to the planning system to protect their communities.

In responding, I remind the House of important recent changes to the planning system, which specifically require planning applications to be made for additional betting shops or payday loan shops. Before April 2015, under the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order, a new betting shop or payday loan shop could be opened in any premises used for financial or professional services in the A2 use class. In addition, an A3 restaurant, an A4 pub and A5 hot food takeaway could all change use to a betting shop or a payday loan shop under permitted development rights without the need for a planning application.

Recognising the concerns that people have expressed about that, the Government changed the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order: betting shops and payday loan shops were made a use class of their own and now require a planning application, allowing proper consideration of the issues that a change of use may raise. As with any planning application, the local planning authority must determine that application in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Those planning authorities that have concerns about the clustering of such uses should therefore ensure that they have an up-to-date plan in place with relevant policies. As with any policy, that plan should be based on evidence and tailored to meet the needs of the local area.

Paragraph 23 of the NPPF is clear—local planning authorities should recognise town centres as the heart of their communities and pursue policies to support their viability and vitality and to promote a mix of uses.
Betting shops and payday loan shops are not an issue everywhere. Where the ongoing clustering of them is an issue, and where that has an adverse impact on the character or balance of uses on the high street, planning authorities can ensure that they have policies in place. We have given them the tools they need to manage the issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate said that this is a local problem that requires local solutions, and the Government agree with that. We do not see the need for national guidance that sets out what every authority should do, partly because the situation is by no means uniform across the country, and partly because there are very different opinions within this House and within local authorities about the right response to these issues. The Government’s view therefore is that this is a matter that is best left to individual local authorities, as they know their circumstances.

Rob Marris rose—

Gavin Barwell: I will not take an intervention now, as I am conscious of the time. What I will say to the hon. Gentleman, who clearly has a real passion for this issue, is that I am prepared to talk to colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and see, as part of its wider review of these issues, whether it would be helpful to issue guidance to local authorities so that they are aware of the powers that they have and how the NPPF works in this area.

Let me move on now to the main issue of the debate, which was in relation to neighbourhood planning. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who put their names to new clause 7 for the opportunity to debate an issue in which so many people in this House have a strong interest. I am talking about the role of neighbourhood planning groups in our planning system.

There are many champions of neighbourhood planning in all parts of the House. As the planning Minister, I am very grateful for that support. The encouragement and support of a trusted local MP can undoubtedly help with many aspects of the neighbourhood planning process.

It is worth taking a quick moment to say why neighbourhood planning is so important. Research tells us that 42% of people say that they would be more supportive of proposed developments if local people had a say in them. There is strong evidence that those plans that have included housing allocations have increased, on average, the allocation above what their local planning authority was putting in place. To put that simply, where we give people control of the planning system, they plan for more housing. It is therefore crucial that the plans that people have worked so hard to produce are given proper consideration when local planning decisions are made.

In responding to new clause 7, I want to reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) that measures in the Housing and Planning Act 2016 that were commenced only on 1 October, the measures in this Bill, and in particular the written ministerial statement, which he referred to in his remarks, that I made yesterday, will address the concerns that he has raised. The national planning policy framework already says clearly that, where a planning application conflicts with a neighbourhood plan that has been brought into force, planning permission should not normally be granted. As my hon. Friend for Congleton pointed out, the issue here is that, where a local planning authority does not have a five-year land supply, that is not a normal circumstance and the presumption in favour of development in some cases—not all—overrides neighbourhood plans.

In the written ministerial statement, I made it clear that from yesterday, where communities plan for housing in their area in a neighbourhood plan, those plans should not be deemed out of date unless there is a significant lack of land supply—that is, under three years. That applies to all plans for the next two years, and for the first two years of any plan that is put into place. That will give a degree of protection that has not been available. The message needs to go out clearly from this House that local authorities must get up-to-date plans in place to provide that protection for neighbourhood plans. I hope that that reassures people. As I said, I have written both to the Planning Inspectorate and to local councils on that issue.

I hope that my right hon. Friend feels that what I have said is part of the solution. I was attracted to part of his new clause 7. It refers to the idea that parish councils and neighbourhood forums should be told if there is a planning application in their area. At present, they have a right to request information, but they are not necessarily told. If he does not press new clause 7 and with his permission, I will take that proposal away and seek to insert it into the Bill in the Lords.

On new clause 8, which deals with the five-year land supply, the written ministerial statement partly addresses that concern, but the other issue that my right hon. Friend touched on was whether, once a five-year land supply has been established, there should be a period that it holds for. The local plans expert group made some very interesting recommendations in that area. We will look at them as part of the White Paper, so I can reassure him that the Government are actively considering that issue and will return to it. I hope that he feels that with the changes in the 2016 Act that have just been brought into force, the changes that we are making in this Bill, the written ministerial statement, the fact that I will accept part of his amendment and what is going to come in the White Paper, there is a package that underlines this Government’s commitment to neighbourhood planning. I thank him on a personal level for the priority that he has given to the issue. I found my discussions with him very useful.

On amendments 28 and 29 in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), I should say that I am always grateful for his advice and suggestions. He is a champion for his constituency and the whole House understands how passionately he feels about the green belt in his constituency. As someone with green belt in my constituency, I both understand and share that passion. The green belt has been a feature of planning policy throughout the post-war period, and although its boundaries have changed over time, the underlying objective of preventing urban sprawl remains as relevant as ever.

I make it clear to the House that the Government’s policy on protecting the green belt and national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty and sites of special
scientific interest remains unchanged. The national planning policy framework is very clear that it is for local authorities to decide whether to review green-belt boundaries but that they should do so only in exceptional circumstances. There needs to be public consultation and independent examination of their proposals. In relation to applications to build homes on green-belt land, again there is very strong protection. The NPPF says that inappropriate development is by definition harmful to the green belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances.

Mr Mitchell: Given the Minister’s eloquent defence of the green belt from the Dispatch Box, can he explain to the House how on earth he reached such a ludicrous position in respect of the decision to lift the delay on Birmingham City Council?

Gavin Barwell: As I said, there is independent examination whenever a local authority seeks to review green-belt boundaries. The inspector looked at whether Birmingham City Council’s decision passed the test of exceptional circumstances, and his judgment was that the council’s proposals on density and its work with neighbouring local authorities under the duty to co-operate passed that test. As my right hon. Friend is aware, the previous Secretary of State issued the holding direction, and we looked at the inspector’s decision to see whether there was any reason we might feel he had misdirected himself, and we decided there were no grounds for us to overturn the decision. I understand that my right hon. Friend does not agree with that decision and feels very angry about it, but that is a factual account of what happened.

Mr Mitchell: Nevertheless, there was no consultation of the 100,000 people in Sutton Coldfield—at least, the consultation was completely ignored. We are the largest town council in the country, and every single town councillor is opposed to this plan. Will my hon. Friend at least suggest to Birmingham City Council that, before it proceeds to ratify the plan, it should consult the largest town council in the country and listen to its views?

Gavin Barwell: I was going to come to that issue when I came to my right hon. Friend’s second new clause. I came to my right hon. Friend’s second new clause. New clause 5 sets out that a local planning authority should consult their parish and town councils, and Government guidance makes it clear that it can be used to develop a neighbourhood plan.

Let me turn briefly to new clause 5 from my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), which is about the resourcing of the neighbourhood planning process. The neighbourhood share of the community infrastructure levy was introduced by this Government in 2013—I suspect that he had a hand in that—to give local people a real say over infrastructure priorities in their area. Communities without a neighbourhood plan already benefit from using 15% of CIL receipts. The money is passed directly to parish and town councils, and Government guidance makes it clear that it can be used to develop a neighbourhood plan.

Let me turn to my right hon. Friend’s second amendment, on the relationship between neighbourhood plans and local plans and on the roles of parish and town councils. He referred to Sutton Coldfield Town Council, which was recently set up under the reforms the Government brought in to allow new town and parish councils to be established. The Government have a lot of sympathy with the argument he is advancing in this amendment. There are already powers in legislation in relation to the statements of community involvement that local authorities have to produce, but I think he has found an issue where we can strengthen the statutory protections. With his leave, and if he were not to press his amendment, I would like to discuss the issue with him and come back in the Lords to see whether we can make the kind of changes he suggests.

Let me turn briefly to new clause 5 from my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), which is about the resourcing of the neighbourhood planning process. The neighbourhood share of the community infrastructure levy was introduced by this Government in 2013—I suspect that he had a hand in that—to give local people a real say over infrastructure priorities in their area. Communities without a neighbourhood plan already benefit from using 15% of CIL receipts. The money is passed directly to parish and town councils, and Government guidance makes it clear that it can be used to develop a neighbourhood plan.

New clause 5 sets out that a local planning authority may make available funds where a parish agrees to forgo some of the CIL levy it expects to get over time. If communities wish to do that, they are already able to do so, because regulation 59A of the CIL regulations allows them to. However, I think that the wider point my right hon. Friend was trying to probe was about the resourcing for neighbourhood planning. We have a budget of £22.5 million for 2015 to 2018. Nearly £10 million of that has been spent so far. Clearly, if we get an acceleration in the number of neighbourhood plans, we will need to find additional resources, and I am happy to discuss further with him how we might go about doing so.

In new clause 2, my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) seeks to encourage developers to comply with existing local and, particularly, neighbourhood plans. At appeal, an award of costs may be made if there has been unreasonable behaviour by a party that has caused another party to incur unnecessary or wasted expenses. It is worth pointing out that Government guidance includes an example of unreasonable behaviour a development that is clearly not in accordance with the development plan and where no other material considerations indicate that a decision should be made against the development plan. So this ability is already there. An award of costs does not determine the actual amount but states the broad extent of the expense that can be recovered, and the matter then has to be settled between the parties or in the courts.
My hon. Friend’s new clause raises issues that it may be of interest to explore further. We need to think about whether we can do more to ensure that the collective vision of a community as set out in its neighbourhood plan is not regularly overridden. I cannot agree with the part of the new clause that refers to initial applications to the local authority. However, in relation to award of costs in the appeals system, we can look at what more we can do to ensure that only appeals that have a legitimate chance of success go forward to the inspectorate. If she is happy not to press her new clause, I am happy to look further at that matter.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) for her two amendments raising the important issue of homes for older and disabled people. The Government want to see new homes and places that stand the test of time. We therefore want to ensure that buildings and spaces work well for everyone and will adapt to the needs of future generations. Her proposal tackles a very important issue. Older and disabled people have a wide range of housing needs. As she implied, we are already seeking to address that in the NPPF. I fully understand why she wanted to further emphasise the importance of this issue by putting it into primary legislation. We need to guard against attempts to put all national planning policy into primary legislation, but she has alligned on a particularly important issue. Given that we support the spirit of her amendments, if she is happy not to press them, I am minded to accept their thrust and work with her to come back in the Lords and with amendments approved by parliamentary counsel that take forward the principle of what she has been trying to achieve. I thank her for her interest in this issue.

I turn finally to the amendments tabled by the official Opposition. I will deal with just the two proposed by the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods). On amendment 7, the Secretary of State and I have been clear that the resourcing of local authority planning departments is an issue very close to our hearts. As I set out in Committee, in the specific case of funding for neighbourhood planning duties, we believe that adequate funding is already available. Planning authorities can claim £5,000 for each of the first five neighbourhood areas they designate and, where there is no parish council, a further £5,000 for each of the first five neighbourhood forums. They can claim an additional £20,000 once they have set the date for a referendum. In addition, where a second referendum must be held, a further £10,000 is available. I know that the House is very interested in second referendums at the moment. I should stress that this relates to areas where there are businesses and local residents; it is not an attempt to rerun the argument. In total, £13 million has been paid out since 2012 to help local planning authorities to meet their responsibilities. We are committed to continuing to review the costs incurred by councils delivering neighbourhood planning as take-up increases, and we will continue to fund them. This should not be conflated with the wider issue of the funding of local planning departments. As the hon. Lady knows, we will include proposals in the White Paper to try to address that issue.

Amendment 8 raises the important issue of neighbourhood planning in deprived communities. As I said in Committee, we recognise the issues that those communities face. Neighbourhood planning groups in these areas can apply for a grant of up to £15,000—£6,000 more than the usual limit—and, in addition, get significant technical support. I am reluctant to put specific spending requirements into primary legislation because we cannot predict the balance of schemes that will come forward, and it could mean that we could not then fund some neighbourhood planning groups in other areas. However, I assure the hon. Lady that we are committed to making sure that deprived communities get the funding they need. This should not just be a policy for wealthy rural areas. We are putting specific effort into encouraging groups in deprived urban areas to apply for neighbourhood planning.

The House has been very patient with me as I have had to deal with a large number of new clauses and amendments in a short period. I hope that Members will not press their new clauses and amendments and are happy with what I have said.

**Question put and negatived.**

### New Clause 9

**PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT: USE CLAUSES AND DEMOLITION OF DRINKING ESTABLISHMENTS**

“(1) The Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 (SI/1987/764) is amended as follows. (2) At the end of section 3(6) insert— (p) drinking establishment.”

(3) In the Schedule, leave out the paragraph starting “Class A4. Drinking Establishments”.

(4) The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (SI1995/418) is amended as follows.

(5) In Part 3 of Schedule 2—

(a) in Class A: Permitted development, leave out “A4 (drinking establishments)”.

(b) In Class AA: Permitted development, leave out “Class A4 (drinking establishments)”.

(c) in Class C: Permitted development, leave out “Class A4 (drinking establishments)”.

(6) In Part 31 of Schedule 2 under A.1 at end insert—

“(i) the building subject to demolition is classed as a drinking establishment.”—(Dr Blackman-Woods.)

The purpose of this amendment is to ensure that any proposed demolition of or change of use to public houses and other drinking establishments would be subject to planning permission. Currently such buildings, unless they have been listed as Assets of Community Value with the local authority, can be demolished or have their use changed without such permission being granted.

**Brought up, and read the First time.**

Dr Blackman-Woods: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

**New clause 10—Funding for local authority planning functions—**

“(1) The Secretary of State must consult local planning authorities prior to the commencement of any new statutory duties to ensure that they are—

(a) adequately resourced; and

(b) adequately funded

so that they are able to undertake the additional work.

(2) In any instance where that is not the case, an independent review of additional cost must be conducted to set out the level of resource required to allow planning authorities to fulfil any new statutory duties.”

This new clause would ensure that the costs of new planning duties are calculated and adequately funded.
New clause 11—Planning obligations—

“(1) The Town and Country Planning Act 1990 is amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1) of section 106 (planning obligations) after paragraph (d) insert—

“(e) requiring that information submitted as part of, and in support of, a viability assessment be made available to the public.”

This new clause would ensure that viability assessments are public documents with no commercial confidentiality restrictions, except in cases where disclosure would not be in the public interest.

Amendment 14, page 11, line 1, leave out clause 12.

This amendment would remove from the Bill completely the changes to planning conditions.

Amendment 11, in clause 12, page 11, line 18, leave out subsection (2)(a).

This amendment would ensure that “acceptable in planning terms” does not mean that conditions can be overlooked because they are unacceptable for other reasons.

Amendment 12, page 11, line 27, leave out subsections (4) to (7).

This amendment would ensure that local authorities are still able to make necessary pre-commencement conditions on developers.

Amendment 13, page 11, line 34, at end insert—

“(6A) The Secretary of State should provide guidance for appeal routes where an agreement cannot be reached on pre-commencement conditions, along guidance on pre-completion and pre-occupation conditions.”

This amendment ensures that there is clarity on appeal routes, pre-completion and pre-occupation conditions.

Amendment 15, in clause 13, page 12, line 32, at end insert—

“(c) information on the number of permitted demolition of offices for residential use to a similar scale including—

(i) the impact on a local plan;

(ii) an estimate as to how many homes the development will deliver; and

(iii) a consultation with the local authority regarding the effect of the change of use on any urban regeneration plans.”

This amendment would ensure monitoring of the impact of permitted right of demolition on offices on urban regeneration that requires office space and on the provision of pre-commencement planning conditions.

Government amendment 20.

Amendment 16, page 13, line 21, at end insert—

“(9) The cost of compiling a register and gathering the information to underpin it should be met by the Secretary of State.”

Dr Blackman-Woods: I will speak to new clause 9, tabled by the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland), because I have added my name to it. It would require the demolition or change of use of pubs to be subject to planning permission. That seems very sensible. It is something that I feel very strongly about. As a shadow Minister, I was at the forefront of the fight against the changes to permitted development rights that the Government started to force through two years ago. I have spoken on pubs and permitted development many times. It is very important, as a pub can often be a real central point for a local community, and so it is right that local residents are given the chance to have their say over what happens to it.

Although pubs can be protected if they are designated an asset of community value, the process for that can be very cumbersome. I believe it is much more appropriate to return the decision on whether a pub can be demolished or converted to the local community, where it belongs, rather than dealing with it through permitted development.

I will move straight on to—

John Redwood: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Blackman-Woods: If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will not, as I am very short of time. I might a bit later, once I have made a bit of progress.

I also want to speak to new clause 11, on the need for the viability assessments to be transparent to the public. Labour has consistently raised this issue, and we continue to believe it is of huge importance. If the public are to accept development in their area, they have to be absolutely certain that viability arrangements for site—in particular, safety integrity level requirements and section 106 requirements—are all that they should be.

As things stand, a viability assessment lays bare to council officers the economics of a project, providing detailed financial evidence for a developer’s claim that a particular scheme would not be viable without reducing the number of affordable homes. The problem is that the assessments are not available for public scrutiny. Labour has commented that despite planning practice on the grounds of commercial confidentiality. It is widely accepted that that is sometimes done so that they can negotiate down their section 106 obligations without public scrutiny. As a consequence, affordable housing may be reduced and the quality of the built environment may suffer. We need a uniform approach to transparency, across the country—I am sure the Minister supports that—so that developers know that they will be open to public scrutiny wherever they decide to operate.

I move on to amendment 14. This Bill is the Government’s sixth measure on the planning system in six years. I hope that the current Minister will not continue what we saw in the past, namely the Government blaming the planning system, or various elements of it, for their failure to build enough homes. On this occasion, pre-commencement planning conditions are in the firing line. But as the Minister well knows from our time in Committee, there is a distinct lack of evidence that pre-commencement planning conditions slow up development. In fact, we heard a lot of evidence that they often make a development acceptable for a local community.

Pre-commencement conditions are also advantageous for a number of different stakeholders in the house building industry. They have certain advantages to developers, who may not be in a position to finalise details for a scheme but wish to secure planning permission as soon as possible. They have advantages for local authorities, because councils may, in practice, have limited legal ability to enforce conditions once a scheme is under way. Conditions are useful to the development industry in general, because they make it possible to permit schemes that might otherwise have to be refused.

7.15 pm

It makes little sense to us to make such important changes as the Minister wants to make to pre-commencement planning conditions, especially as the
evidence that we received suggested that the problem was not with the conditions but with the signing off of planning conditions in a timely manner. The evidence suggested that the problem was mostly with the resourcing of planning departments and the fact that they did not have enough officers to carry out enforcement, rather than with the pre-commencement conditions. We heard that that could slow up development or result in development being rejected because the conditions are not applied to it.

We intend to press to a vote new clause 11 and amendment 14, because we want to ensure that measures are in place not only to deliver the homes that we want in this country, but to make sure that they are in communities that have access to the services, jobs and general good-quality built environment and natural environment that people want.

I will give way to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) if he still wants to intervene.

John Redwood: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. My question goes back to her first amendment on pubs. Does she not accept that there are some cases in which no one can run a commercial pub, and no one wants to? In such cases, surely, action has to be taken.

Dr Blackman-Woods: We are not against a change of use for a pub; we are against the fact that that change goes through permitted development, taking away local people's right to have a say over what happens to the pub. The new clause is designed to remove those changes from permitted development and put them back into the planning system, which is exactly where they should be.

Philip Davies: I do not intend to trouble the House for long, but I want to focus on new clause 9. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) is in his place, and I pay tribute to him for the work that he has done over many years to support pubs. Just to show that I do not want to ban things that I do not do myself, I remind the House that I do not drink. I am a teetotaller, but I still believe in pubs and their importance in the local community, and in people's freedom to do as they please.

The hon. Gentleman has done a fantastic job of supporting the pub industry. As I made clear in my intervention, during the previous Parliament I voted on the side of pubs on the question of whether they should be tied. I felt that too many pubs were tied to unfair conditions that affected their viability, and I was pleased that the Government lost that vote. My instinct is to want to support the hon. Gentleman's new clause 9, because I support pubs and the work that he does.

I will not blame the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), who is very impressive, but I clearly did not explain myself very well when I raised my concern. It was not her lack of understanding; it was clearly the fault of my explanation. I apologise for putting her in the difficult position of trying to make sense of something that did not make any sense at all.

I would be very pleased to hear how the hon. Member for Leeds North West can address my concern about new clause 9. If a struggling pub needs support from the bank to keep it going and the bank knows that the site of the closed pub can easily be changed to an alternative use without going through a cumbersome planning process that may end up with the plans being rejected, my fear is that the bank—it knows that if all goes wrong, it can get its money back by changing the pub's use or building something else on the site—will pull the plug on the pub much earlier in the process, instead of investing more money in the pub to help it to keep going and to turn it around. The bank might think, "If this goes on, we’re not going to get our money back. If we can’t get planning permission on this land, we’ll be left with a debt we’re never going to be able to recover. We do not want to get ourselves into that mess in the first place, so we will pull the plug on the pub."

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is my constituency neighbour, for making that point—I also thank him for his support on pub issues in the past—but his concerns are entirely misplaced. I may not have the time to convince him of that today. The reality is that profitable pubs are being closed up and down the country, but that is nothing to do with the banks. No one is saying that, when a pub is not viable and no one wants to buy it to run it as a pub, it should not be given planning permission. However, because of these absurd loopholes at the moment, people are deliberately targeting profitable pubs because they will make a good supermarket. Surely as someone who believes in localism, he cannot support that.

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good case, although as someone who worked for a supermarket chain for 13 years, I am not sure that was the best example he could have given to try to persuade me. I take on board his point, which is a good one.
I will not go on for much longer, because I want to listen to what other Members have to say. I am genuinely in a difficult position because I can see both sides of the argument. I will, however, reiterate my fear about a new clause that has the best of intentions. It aims to do what I think we would all want, which is to help the pubs sector to flourish. Pubs are important to our local communities, and I am all for them. In some instances—perhaps not in every instance, and perhaps not even in the majority of instances—new clause 9 may have the unintended consequence of leading to the closure of pubs much sooner and much more often than would otherwise be the case.

I will listen to the cases that other Members make. I will do a rare thing in this House: I will listen to the arguments. I will, however, reiterate my fear about a new clause that has the best of intentions. It aims to do what I think we would all want, which is to help the pubs sector to flourish. Pubs are important to our local communities, and I am all for them. In some instances—perhaps not in every instance, and perhaps not even in the majority of instances—new clause 9 may have the unintended consequence of leading to the closure of pubs much sooner and much more often than would otherwise be the case.

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[Mike Wood]

Given what we hear about the number of pubs closing each week, a proposal such as new clause 9 has a superficial attraction. After all, pubs are at the heart of our communities not only as a place for people to come together, with all the social and health benefits that that brings, but increasingly as community hubs, as more and more services are operating out of licensed premises.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mike Wood: I am afraid that I must continue.

Unfortunately, the new clause smacks a little of, “Something needs to be done. This is something, so it must be done.” What we really need is thriving pubs, but the new clause would do little to support them. Removing permitted development rights for change of use would put many more pubs at risk because those rights are a genuine asset that pubs can borrow against. They have a real value and mean not only that pubs can invest in development, but that they have a little more leeway when times are tough, knowing that should they fail they will still have value because a change of use is available under permitted development. Although the mind is drawn more immediately to the 21 pubs a week that close than to the many more that are just about managing to stay open, the latter would be hit the hardest by the removal of permitted development rights.

We have heard a number of examples of successful pubs being converted into supermarkets, and addressing that is the purpose of the new clause. However, where there are successful pubs at the heart of our communities, they can already be added to the register of assets of community value so that permitted development rights are suspended, or councils can use article 4 directions to suspend those rights. The new clause is therefore not necessary, which is why I shall vote against it this evening.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I can be brief: I hope the Minister will resist amendment 14 entirely; clause 12 is an excellent clause.

Gavin Barwell: I start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on one of the finest speeches I have heard in this Chamber.

First, I will briefly address Government amendment 20. This minor technical amendment clarifies the fact that the Secretary of State is able to require only certain premises, which we clearly would not want.

In the short time available, I will do as much justice as I can to the new clauses and amendments that have been spoken to. On new clause 9, I start by saying to the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) that I would be very happy to sit down with him and other colleagues who feel strongly about the issue. I do not think that we have had the time tonight to air the issues involved properly, but I will briefly say two things to him so that he at least knows where I start from.

First, the hon. Gentleman will know that the current Government, and the coalition Government whom he supported, have done a lot to try to help our pub industry. There is the community pub business support programme, which is providing more than £3.5 million of funding for people to buy their local pub. There is the community right to bid, and people can list their local as an asset of community value, with more than 1,280 pubs listed to date. There has been the scrapping of the beer duty escalator—appropriately, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) is in his place as the Whip on the Government Front Bench. Beer duty was frozen in the 2016 Budget, having been reduced in each of the three preceding Budgets.

The Government’s starting point on the detail of the new clause—I am happy to discuss it with the hon. Gentleman—is that, from 6 April 2015, permitted development rights for the change of use or demolition of a pub were removed for those pubs that a community has demonstrated it values by nominating them as assets of community value. It is not only the Government who believe that that strikes the right balance. A briefing note from the British Beer and Pub Association makes the point that removing permitted development would not only stop the conversion of pubs to supermarkets and whatever else we would want to stop, but might prevent pubs from doing improvement works to their premises, which we clearly would not want.

Greg Mulholland: Surely the Minister knows what the so-called British Beer and Pub Association is—it is the representative body for the large property companies, called pubcos, which are selling off pubs. Of course it wants its members to be able to continue this appalling asset-stripping and to continue doing deals with supermarkets.

Gavin Barwell: I am well aware of what the BBPA is, but I tend to take the approach that, when I see briefings, I look at the points they make. If they make a sensible point, they are worth looking at. The BBPA makes a serious point. As I have said, I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss those issues further.

We discussed viability assessments, which are the subject of new clause 11, in Committee. There is existing legislation in the form of the Freedom of Information Act and environmental information regulations. The Government release information, and local authorities are free to make viability assessments publicly available.

In the time available, I shall make one simple point. The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) said that she wants a uniform approach across the country. I am interested in seeing councils trial different approaches to see what works most effectively. The Mayor of London is not a Conservative politician, but I was interested to see the policy that he announced recently. That policy is a different way of tackling the problem—a tariff is set, and if developers meet the requirements, they do not need to go through a viability assessment.

Dr Blackman-Woods: The point I was making was that people should have access to viability assessments no matter where they live.

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Lady is entitled to hold that view, but I take a slightly more localist one. Local authorities should decide whether they want to publish that information. Commercial confidentiality makes that difficult in some cases. To a degree, her proposal
recognises that, because it would not mean access in every single case. However, I am not persuaded of the need to legislate.

In the two or three minutes available, I want to address planning conditions, which my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset mentioned in his excellent brief speech. It is not the Government’s approach to blame the planning system or anybody else for the housing problems the country faces. For 30 or 40 years, we have not built enough homes, and a range of people are responsible for that. Governments of different political colours have not done enough on infrastructure funding. There are problems in our planning system, but that is not a personal attack on planners. We need to reform that system to make it easier to release land and to speed up the process of building homes. We need to change the local house building politics in our communities.

To a degree, that is what neighbourhood planning is all about. We need to diversify the market so that a far bigger range of people build our homes.

The Prime Minister has given me a very clear brief, however. We should look at anything that makes it more difficult to build the homes that we desperately need in this country. There is very clear evidence about this, and that is not just from developers—hon. Members might say, “Developers would say that wouldn’t they”—but from the District Councils Network. In its evidence, it acknowledges that an overuse of planning conditions means that it takes longer to move from the point at which we get planning approval for housing to the point at which spades go into the ground.

In the year to June 2016, the planning reforms that the coalition Government and this Conservative Government have enacted led to the granting of a record number of planning applications for housing in this country—for 277,000 homes. Rather than being complacent about that, I take the opposite attitude. People cannot live in a planning application. It is all about getting the right balance. We need to deal with this work and to conclude section 106 agreements quickly. We will do something about that. Another is the performance of our utility companies. We need to reform the system and get things right. We need to legislate.

That involves looking at a range of issues, one of which, as the hon. Member for City of Durham rightly said, is the resourcing of planning departments, and their ability to deal with this work and to conclude section 106 agreements quickly. We will do something about that. Another problem is the performance of our major developers, which are too slow to build out, and we will address that.

There is clear and compelling evidence, however, that one of the factors that leads to this problem is the overuse of planning conditions and, in particular, the use of pre-commencement conditions—when a local authority essentially says, “Before you can even get a spade in the ground, here is a long list of things that need to be done.” In some cases, such conditions are justified, such as for archaeological works, when things need to be done before building starts, but there is plenty of evidence, as presented to the Public Bill Committee, that such conditions are being misused in many cases, and the Government are determined to put a stop to it. We are determined to get the homes that we desperately need in this country built, and the Bill is a first step in that process.
NOES

Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, Dr Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Dudridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evenett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justice
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hand, rh Matt
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Dan, Mr
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kacwczynski, Daniel
Kenny, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Lewin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mordaunt, Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David

Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttal, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Timpson, Edward
Tohurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
7.52 pm

More than four hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on consideration, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

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

Clause 11

STATEMENTS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Amendments made: 17, page 10, line 23, leave out “Section 18” and insert “In section 18(2)”. This amendment and amendments 18, 19 and 22 provide for the removal of the power conferred by clause 11(3) for regulations to require a local planning authority to review its statement of community involvement at prescribed times. The power in clause 10 now covers this in more general terms.

Amendment 18, line 24, leave out from “involvement)” to “after” in line 25.

Amendment 19, line 26, leave out subsection (3).— (Gavin Barwell.)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 17.

Amendment 19, line 26, leave out subsection (3).— (Gavin Barwell.)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 17

Clause 12

RESTRICTIONS ON POWER TO IMPOSE PLANNING CONDITIONS

Amendment proposed: 14, page 11, line 1, leave out clause 12.— (Dr Blackman-Woods.)

This amendment would remove from the Bill the completely the changes to planning conditions.

The House divided: Ayes 157, Noes 279.

Division No. 109

[7.53 pm]

AYS

Alexander, Heidi
Allen-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Berger, Luciana
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen

Burnham, rh Andy
Burnham, rh Andy
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Chapman, Jenny
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Mr David
Creasy, Stella
Cryer, John

Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Eterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Field, rh Frank
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Fynne, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jarvis, Dan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Kane, Mike
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarty, Kerry
McFadden, rh Mr Pat

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter

McGovern, Alison
Mclnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Meares, Ian
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Onwurah, Chi
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Powell, Lucy
Reed, Mr Jamie
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Ryan, rh Joan
Shah, Naz
Shannon, Jim
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes: Jeff Smith and Vicky Foxcroft

NOES

Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Question accordingly negatived.
Clause 13

Register of planning applications etc

Amendment made: 20, page 13, line 21, at end insert—
“( ) A development order—
(a) may make different provision for different kinds of application or notification;
(b) may make provision which applies generally or only in relation to particular kinds of notification or application.” —[Gavin Barwell.]"}

This amendment applies to a development order which makes provision about the information to be contained in a planning register about prior approval applications or notifications of proposed development. It confirms that the order may make different provision for different kinds of application or notification or provision that applies only in relation to particular kinds of application or notification.

Clause 23

Consequential amendments

Amendment made: 21, page 19, line 45, at end insert—
“, and
(b) in subsection (6) for the words from ‘acquiring authority’ to the end of the subsection substitute “—
(a) ‘acquiring authority’ means a person who could be authorised to acquire compulsorily the land to which the proposal mentioned in subsection (1) relates (regardless of whether the proposal is to acquire an interest in or a right over the land or to take temporary possession of it), and
(b) ‘owner’ has the meaning given in section 7 of the Acquisition of Land Act 1981.” —[Gavin Barwell.]"}

This amendment ensures that the term “acquiring authority” in section 172 of the Housing and Planning Act 2016 has the same meaning that it has in clause 14 of the Bill, so that the power of entry in section 172 is available in relation to all proposals to take temporary possession of land under clause 14.

Clause 40

Commencement

Amendment made: 22, page 32, line 13, leave out “, 10 and 11” and insert “and 10”. —[Gavin Barwell.]"

See the explanatory statement for amendment 17.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I will now suspend the House for no more than five minutes in order to make a decision about certification. The Division bells will be rung two minutes before the House resumes. Following my certification, the Government will table the appropriate consent motions, copies of which will be available shortly in the Vote Office and will be distributed by Doorkeepers.

8.11 pm

On resuming —

Madam Deputy Speaker: I can now inform the House of my decision about certification. For the purposes of Standing Order No. 83L(2), I have certified clauses 1 to 31 and 32 of, and schedules 1 to 3 to, the Bill, including the amendments made on Report, as relating exclusively to England and within devolved legislative competence. Copies of my certificate are available in the Vote Office.

Under Standing Order No. 83M, consent motions are therefore required for the Bill to proceed. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motions?

Gavin Barwell indicated assent.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England and Wales) (Standing Order No. 83M(4)).

[Mrs Eleanor Laing in the Chair]

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I remind hon. Members that if there are Divisions, only Members representing constituencies in England and Wales may vote on the consent motion for England and Wales, and only Members representing constituencies in England may vote on the consent motion for England.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83M(5)).

That the Committee consents to the following certified clauses of the Neighbourhood Planning Bill:

Clauses certified under Standing Order No. 83L(2) as relating exclusively to England and Wales and being within devolved legislative competence

Clauses 14 to 30 and 33 to 35 of the Neighbourhood Planning Bill, including the amendment made on Report, and new clause 6 added on Report. —[Gavin Barwell.]"}

Question agreed to.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England) (Standing Order No. 83M(4)(d)).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83M(4)(d)).

That the Committee consents to the following certified clauses and schedules of the Neighbourhood Planning Bill:

Clauses and schedules certified under Standing Order No. 83L(2) as relating exclusively to England and being within devolved legislative competence

Clauses 1 to 31 and 32 of, and Schedules 1 to 3 to, the Bill (Bill 83), including the Amendments made on Report. —[Gavin Barwell.]"}

Question agreed to.

The occupant of the Chair left the Chair to report the decisions of the Committee (Standing Order No. 83M(6)).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair; decisions reported.

Third Reading

8.15 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

A lot of people across Westminster, Whitehall and the country have worked very hard to get the Neighbourhood Planning Bill this far, so I would like to start by thanking all hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions, for their attention to detail and for sharing the views and concerns of their constituents. Over the past few months, we have seen
parliamentary scrutiny at its best, and as a result we have a better Bill. Special thanks should go to members of the Public Bill Committee—in particular, its two chairmen, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone).

I am extremely grateful to everyone who took the time to contribute to public consultations or who provided written or oral evidence to the Public Bill Committee. We would not have a Bill at all if it were not for the expert skill and the guidance of the Clerks of the House, and the excellent work done by the officials in my Department. Particular thanks should go to the Bill team and my extremely dedicated private office. Finally, I cannot praise highly enough the work of my hon. Friend the Housing and Planning Minister. He should be very proud of his excellent work.

Everyone involved has worked so hard because we all want to see the housing market working for everyone, not just the privileged few. We will not have that without a much greater supply of homes in the right places, and we will not have that greater supply without a planning system that supports faster, more efficient construction.

Over the past six and a half years we have laid the groundwork for that. Our reforms have seen planning policy radically streamlined, and local people have been given much greater ability to determine the scale, nature and location of developments in their area. As a result, we have seen planning permissions go up, building starts go up and new home completions go up, with almost 900,000 new homes delivered in England since 2010.

This Bill furthers that progress. The Neighbourhood Planning Bill contains measures that will help us identify more land that is suitable for development, while continuing to protect the areas that we value most, including, of course, the green belt. It further strengthens neighbourhood planning and ensures communities have a stronger say in developments that affect them. It also supports the local plan process so that all communities in England can benefit from having one.

The Bill reforms the use of pre-commencement planning conditions so that they are proportionate and effective and do not act as an unnecessary barrier to construction. It improves transparency, making it easier to understand the number of homes being created under permitted development rights. Finally, while compulsory purchase is always used as a last resort, the Bill will make the process clearer, faster and, above all, fairer for all parties.

The Government want a better housing market. All parties, including the Labour party, want a better housing market, and the public demand a better housing market. They want a planning system that is seen as fair and effective and that gives them greater control over the decisions that affect their lives. That is exactly what the Neighbourhood Planning Bill will deliver. It is not a magic bullet or a one-stop solution for the housing shortage or our housing stock, but it is an important step in the right direction. It makes our planning system faster and fairer, and it will help us build more homes. I commend the Bill to the House.

8.19 pm

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): At this relatively late hour, I do not wish to delay the House for long.

Our position on Third Reading reflects much of what has been said about the Bill on Second Reading and in Committee. We believe that there are wasted opportunities to get legislation in place that would see an uplift not only in the number of houses that we build but the quality of those homes and the services and infrastructure that are necessary for communities to work well. I am particularly disappointed with the lack of measures to strongly promote new settlements via garden villages, cities or new towns.

Labour Members welcome the measures in the Bill to further strengthen neighbourhood planning and the inclusion of changes to local plan making to enable planning to take place across more than one local authority where this is necessary. We also welcome the changes to CPOs as far as they go, but the Minister will know that we believe that a full-scale review of CPO legislation is overdue. We were pleased to hear his remarks regarding this, and look forward to debating proposals on it in future.

Other measures, we feel, could actually slow down development. I think the Secretary of State is wrong to weaken regulation of pre-commencement planning conditions, as that takes away important protections from the community—the very conditions that might make a development work for local people—with no obvious benefits or speeding up of the process. All it is likely to deliver is poorer-quality development, the very last thing we all need. Local dissent could lead to further delay in the planning process. We believe that there is also a missed opportunity to reverse the Government’s permitted development policies, which prevent proper planning on our high streets and produce poor-quality housing, often at the expense of much-needed office accommodation. I very much hope that the other place will take a close look at the pre-commencement conditions and permitted development clauses and ask the Government to reconsider.

Mostly, I am disappointed that our amendment on making information on the viability on sites more publicly available was not accepted. The Government should be aspiring to make our planning system more transparent. The Secretary of State knows that the amendment would help to deliver more affordable housing and supportive infrastructure, and where that is not the case we would have a better understanding of the reasons for non-delivery.

The Minister has said many times during the passage of this Bill that we will have to wait for the housing White Paper for new policies to address the housing crisis. According to what has been said, the White Paper will cover these areas: objectively assessed need, how it is calculated, and its implications for strategic housing market areas and strategic housing land availability assessments; changes to community infrastructure levy appraisals; amendments to the NPPF; measures to support small and medium-sized enterprises; policies to support home ownership; innovative housing design; permitted development changes; measures to free up land; resourcing of planning departments; right to be heard; and urban regeneration—plus a few other issues that he mentioned...
earlier. That looks like quite a White Paper. However, despite the number of things already in it, I hope it will deliver more on infrastructure too, because that is absolutely needed to underpin more housing output. It was taken out of the Bill, which is a pity, and the Government must now say what they are going to do to rectify the deepening lack of appropriate infrastructure. We are going to press the Government on this in the coming months because we definitely want more homes to be built, but we also want these homes to be part of thriving communities delivering the jobs, environment and services people want—in short, places where people want to live and can thrive.

I warmly thank all my hon. Friends for their hard work on this Bill, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), and thank members of the Committee and those who have contributed in this place. I wish those in the other place well in their scrutiny of this Bill and look forward to its returning here.

8.23 pm

John Redwood: I wish Ministers well with their Bill. One of its central purposes is one I strongly support—the idea that we need to build more homes. It has been a tragedy that in this century there has been a big reduction in the proportion of people in our country who can afford to own their own home and feel that they can get access to home ownership—something that previous generations thought was more normal and easier to achieve. One of things we must do is build more. Like the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce), I look forward to the housing White Paper, because many of the things that we need to do have nothing to do with legislation but are about money, permissions, and using what law we already have to ensure that our industry can serve the needs of all the people.

I also support the Bill’s second big aim, which has to be balanced against the priority of creating many more affordable homes for sale and, where needed, for rent—namely the priority that local communities must be part of the process. We are asking local communities to go to a great deal of effort, to work on the local plan as a principal planning authority and to work on neighbourhood plans village by village. They will do so willingly only if they feel their work will be taken seriously.

I represent parts of two local authority areas, West Berkshire and Wokingham Borough. Both have had a very good record over the past few decades on making sure that a lot of new housing is built in the area to help with the national need. In particular, at the moment Wokingham has four very large sites, with between 2,500 and 3,500 new homes on each, as its contribution to the national effort. Wokingham wants to make sure that the Minister’s fine words earlier will be taken into account and be part of the system—that when the local community has done the decent thing and made sure there is plenty of land available for building, an inspector does not come along and say that more homes will be built somewhere else, because some developer is gaming the system. I was very reassured that the Minister is well aware of that problem.

Where local authorities co-operate, and local communities are prepared to take responsibility and make those judgments, Ministers, their officials and the inspectors must understand that those authorities and communities should be taken seriously and, in most cases, their views should be upheld. I hope that as the Bill progresses Ministers will take on board the fact that there is huge support on the Government Benches for more homes and for local planning, but that we sometimes think inspectors still do not get it and developers are very clever, meaning that we end up with homes in places where we do not want them, which gives the whole policy a bad name.
In Eastleigh, it seems to be an impossible one, and my constituents find it daunting and frustrating. I thank members of Botley Parish Council, who have shown great interest in advancing a neighbourhood plan in their community. That gives councillors and the community the opportunity to feed into a strategic vision for the area, endorsing opportunities to create new housing sites and considering new local priorities. Housing and planning are not things that should be done to people, and this Bill and the Localism Act 2011 are important in ensuring that that does not happen.

My constituency suffers from a dire planning situation, where the local council is letting down residents by not producing a timely local plan that protects the community. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for all the work that he has done with me to make my local council get its act together, so that everybody can come forward and be part of the neighbourhood planning process. Work on the local plan is slow and arduous, and large areas of ancient woodland are under threat as a result of it. We must form a strong, united front against bad planning from the council, bringing together Ministers and the local MPs—I see my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) in his place.

At the moment, the situation is like the wild west; it is a free-for-all for developers. Neighbourhood plans are important because they give communities a real say in the planning process. The plans give us a chance to see whether there are any cosy relationships with developers—to see whether people are linked to local developers of choice—and whether particular developments are right for our communities.

Communities strongly support the principle of neighbourhood planning. Since 2013 each of the 200 plans that has gone to a referendum has been approved; 340,000 votes were cast, 89% of which were in favour of the plans. We need to make sure that neighbourhood plans go from strength to strength, because of the large amount of time that communities and councillors invest in their production. We also need to pressure local authorities into working with parishes. As I have said, it is not possible to produce a neighbourhood plan if there are no local policies to hang it on. In Botley and Boorley Green, there are no clear policies to work with.

National planning policy makes it clear that if a planning application conflicts with a neighbourhood plan that has been brought into force, permission should not be granted. It is absolutely right that communities have that certainty. In Velmore community centre, in Chandlers Ford, I was delighted to have conversations about older people’s accommodation and appropriate housing for our disabled people. People spoke to me about what matters to them in local planning, which is that they should have somewhere to move to within the community.

I am a strong advocate of neighbourhood planning, and I would like the Planning Inspectorate to show a more consistent approach to neighbourhood plans. I am delighted to hear from the Secretary of State that he has done with me to make my local council get its act together, so that everybody can come forward and be part of the neighbourhood planning process. Work on the local plan is slow and arduous, and large areas of ancient woodland are under threat as a result of it. We must form a strong, united front against bad planning from the council, bringing together Ministers and the local MPs—I see my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) in his place.

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I am a strong advocate of neighbourhood planning, and I would like the Planning Inspectorate to show a more consistent approach to neighbourhood plans. I am delighted to hear from the Secretary of State that that is what he is looking for. We continually hear in this Chamber about examples of conflicting judgments. The policy is right, and it is powerful, and I hope that at planning inspectorate level, neighbourhood plans will be given enough weight.
EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119,(11)).

EU EMISSIONS TRADING SYSTEM: 2021-2030
That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 11065/15 and Addenda 1 to 3, a Proposal for a Council Directive amending Directive 2003/87/EC to enhance cost-effective emission reductions and low-carbon investments; welcomes the European Commission's intention to reform the EU Emissions Trading System in line with the conclusions of the October 2014 European Council; and calls on the Government to continue to negotiate, in line with Cabinet-cleared positions, with the aim of agreeing a well-functioning and balanced System that is environmentally robust and supports cost-effective emissions reductions while preserving industrial competitiveness and promoting a level playing-field.

EU ASYLUM REFORM PACKAGE (OPT-IN DECISIONS)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts
8.37 pm
Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I rise to present a petition of over 200 residents of the Airdrie and Shotts constituency, which I represent, on the subject of the Women Against State Pension Inequality. The petition states: The petition of residents of the Airdrie and Shotts constituency, which I represent, on the subject of the Women Against State Pension Inequality.
8.38 pm
Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of residents of my Southampton, Itchen constituency, particularly those who live on the junction of Station Road and Spring Road. Even as I was with the Clerks yesterday to signal my intention to present this petition today, there was another accident at that junction. It is now imperative that Southampton City Council do something about it before there is another serious injury or, God forbid, fatality.

The petition reads:

The petition of residents of Southampton Itchen, Declares that there should be road safety measures introduced at the junction of Spring Road and Station Road in Southampton, after a series of road traffic accidents that have occurred in recent months.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Southampton City Council to review the safety at the Spring Road and Station Road junction and outline what actions it plans to undertake to ensure the safety of road and pedestrian users; and further that the council confirm the timeframe for implementing those changes.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Road Safety in Southampton Itchen
8.39 pm
William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I rise on behalf of 3,500 of my constituents and local residents who have signed this and similar local petitions to present a petition relating to the Greater Manchester spatial framework and its potential effects on the green belt in my constituency.

While of course we need to provide new developments to fill the housing shortage, it should be done in a way that is sensitive to the local environment and the wishes of local communities. The green belt is a vital barrier to urban sprawl and is hugely valued by local people. The framework proposes the building of 4,000 new homes on green-belt land, effectively doubling the size of the village of High Lane.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Department for Communities and Local Government to avoid including large-scale residential development on the greenbelt, which is a valuable barrier to urban sprawl and is hugely valued by local people; and further declares that brownfield land should be prioritised for residential development provided that proper infrastructure is in place.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Greater Manchester Spatial Framework
8.39 pm
William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I rise on behalf of 3,500 of my constituents and local residents who have signed this and similar local petitions to present a petition relating to the Greater Manchester spatial framework and its potential effects on the green belt in my constituency.

While of course we need to provide new developments to fill the housing shortage, it should be done in a way that is sensitive to the local environment and the wishes of local communities. The green belt is a vital barrier to urban sprawl and is hugely valued by local people. The framework proposes the building of 4,000 new homes on green-belt land, effectively doubling the size of the village of High Lane.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Department for Communities and Local Government to avoid including large-scale residential development on the greenbelt, which is a valuable barrier to urban sprawl and is hugely valued by local people; and further declares that brownfield land should be prioritised for residential development provided that proper infrastructure is in place.

Declares that the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework should avoid large-scale residential development on the greenbelt, which is a valuable barrier to urban sprawl and is hugely valued by local people; and further declares that brownfield land should be prioritised for residential development provided that proper infrastructure is in place.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Department for Communities and Local Government to avoid including large-scale residential development on the greenbelt in the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework, as well as prioritising brownfield land for residential developments.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I am grateful to join my colleagues from Greater Manchester in presenting a petition to the House on the Greater Manchester spatial framework. I rise to present the petition on behalf of residents of the United Kingdom. This and similar petitions in the constituency have attracted more than 2,600 signatures from concerned residents. I thank all those across Cheadle who have signed the petitions.

If this scale of development goes ahead, it will not only devastate our countryside, but place unprecedented pressure on local infrastructure and undermine our local communities. Instead, I call for the development of brownfield sites so that communities can enjoy the additional investment from regeneration projects and avoid the loss of our natural landscape and precious green belt.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK,
Declares that the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework should avoid development on the green belt; further that Cheadle could lose much of its precious and much valued land if development is permitted on green belt land; and further that action should be taken to prioritise development on suitable brownfield sites to protect our green space.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council and the Department for Communities and Local Government to agree a Greater Manchester Spatial Framework that prohibits development on green belt land and prioritises development on brownfield sites.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
International Human Rights Day

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

8.44 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Before I start my speech on International Human Rights Day, I would like to quote a tweet that has just been received from Matthew Rycroft, our excellent UN ambassador in New York. He says:

“For every barrel bomb dropped
For every chemical weapon deployed
For every bullet fired on innocents
There will be accountability.”

I am sure the Minister will support that, because throughout the war in Syria and Aleppo we have constantly asked questions about who is collecting evidence.

I apologise for my croak. I will have a drink of lemonade every so often and see whether I can get through my speech.

I am here to mark International Human Rights Day, which was on Saturday 10 December. I will provide a brief overview of the countries and issues of the most concern. The fact is that although most countries have signed and ratified the main international human rights conventions, many people in the world—far too many—continue to be the victims of serious and systematic human rights violations such as torture, extra-judicial killings, arbitrary detention, disappearance, slavery and overt discrimination. State officials, who are meant to serve their fellow citizens, often use their powers to terrorise and subjugate them, whether in the name of national security or counter-terrorism; to uphold a kleptocratic regime in which they have a vested interest, because they are tainted by society’s prejudices; or even just because they can get away with it.

Sad, human rights are too often referred to in a disparaging or dismissive way in the UK. I believe that disregard may stem at least in part from complacency, misunderstanding and possibly even incredulity. It is all too easy to take rights for granted when, by and large, we benefit from them, although of course I am aware that we are all far from perfect, have deficiencies that need to be addressed and must remain vigilant to ensure that our rights are not eroded. It can be challenging to imagine the real suffering endured by the many millions who have their rights violated, and it can be distressing to believe that people can still treat others with such disdain and cruelty. However, as most of us here know, terrible things happen every day, everywhere. Many of us have had the privilege and honour of meeting victims of human rights violations all over the world, who have given us detailed testimony and whose courage and dignity are simply astounding.

I am concerned that, post-Brexit, we are heading for a repressive state with a virtual absence of outlets for non-violent dissent. For every barrel bomb dropped, for every chemical weapon deployed, for every bullet fired on innocents, there will be accountability.”

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I turn to specifics. I know that there was a very good debate this afternoon on Syria. Unfortunately I was in the Foreign Affairs Committee at the time, where we were debating, among other things, arms exports from our own country and how we continue to police them. There can be no doubt that Syria has long been a repressive state with a virtual absence of outlets for non-violent dissent.

I remember going to Syria some time ago, on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union committee on the human rights of parliamentarians, to visit two imprisoned Syrian MPs. Let us say that I was left in no doubt during my visit about the Syrian Government’s utter lack of respect for their human rights obligations, and for the fundamental political rights of their citizens. Understandably, the people of Syria became tired of being subjugated and tried to break free. The Government instituted a brutal crackdown, from which a civil war followed, resulting in mass atrocities, carried out in the main by the Syrian and Russian Governments, although they are not the only perpetrators. Schools and hospitals have been deliberately targeted; thousands have been detained and tortured; hundreds of thousands have been killed; and millions have been forced to flee their homes.

Earlier this year, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights concluded in a report that the Assad regime had killed so many detainees in Syria that it had committed the crime against humanity of extermination. More recently, in late November, the UN under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs, our former colleague and former UK MP Stephen O’Brien, said that residents of Aleppo were at risk of extermination. I fear that the news we hear tonight gives us no cause for optimism.

This is a complex conflict with many different actors with differing agendas, but let us not forget that it started because the Syrian people wanted their fundamental rights to be respected. Let us not forget either that no Syrian civilian should be deliberately targeted in the fighting or starved to death in besieged areas of the country. Given that we aired many of those issues earlier today, I will not elaborate further except to ask the UK Government yet again to let us know how they will work with their partners in the international community as a matter of extreme urgency to get the vulnerable—the children, the elderly and the injured, and doctors and nurses—out and get aid in, particularly to besieged areas, and to protect those left behind, particularly to prevent and avoid mass executions.

Yemen is another complex conflict in which mass atrocities are being committed by all sides, including as a result of Saudi-led coalition air strikes. Earlier this year, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights accused the Saudi-led coalition of causing twice as many civilian casualties as all the other forces fighting in Yemen. Since the breakdown of peace talks in early August, the fighting has intensified and continues to take an unacceptable toll on civilians, as we have seen on television recently, so why does the UK continue to sell arms to Saudi Arabia for use in the conflict in
Yemen? I do not want to hear the standard responses, which include that the UK has one of the world’s most robust arms exports licensing committees. Obviously in this case, it is either not robust enough or it is not being properly applied.

Countries in which the human rights situation is a serious concern are Turkey, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Bahrain, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Sudan, North Korea and Burma.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Lady for her indomitable spirit and for speaking out for human rights. Does she agree that, some 98 years after the 1948 convention was passed, throughout the world there is persecution of those with Christian and other religious beliefs on a level and with a significance that has never before happened? Does she agree that hon. Members must do everything we can to protect the most basic human right—the right to life and freedom, and the right to have a religious belief, whatever it may be? Does she also agree that we should use any and every possibility to exert influence in the world? This debate is an example of doing just that.

Ann Clwyd: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. Over the past 30 years, from among my friends in Iraq, I have seen minorities having to flee from where they live. My oldest Iraqi friend is a Mandaean; there are very few of them left in Iraq now. The last conference I went to in Kurdistan, held by the former President of Iraq, was called to discuss how to protect minorities. Sadly, of course, the persecution of minorities is happening in many countries in the world, but at least we are, I hope, having some influence in Iraq.

I am aware that we cannot do everything, but conversely that does not mean we should not be doing more. First, we should be more vocal and confident in defence of human rights in UK foreign policy. I know that the UK Government, particularly the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, raise human rights concerns with foreign Governments, but I contend that more needs to be done to convince state-sanctioned human rights violators that abuses are counterproductive, particularly in the longer term, because fair and tolerant societies are more prosperous and stable and because ultimately violators may be held to account and have to pay for their crimes. The UK must also promote a universal rights agenda, and not tout human rights as British values, which simply plays into the hands of those who intend to exercise their authority for personal advantage. The UK and the wider international community must continue and do more to support these courageous activists and to challenge such destructive legislation.

I would like to draw attention to Amnesty International UK’s Write for Rights campaign, which this year features cases from, among other places, China, Iran, Egypt, Malawi and the UK. Last weekend, I had the pleasure to co-host with Mr Speaker and Amnesty International UK a parliamentary reception to encourage MPs and peers to take action in support of those whose fundamental rights are at risk of being violated. It means so much to those receiving messages of solidarity; it keeps their hopes alive for a better future. A letter to the authorities can also spur them into action; when they know that the eyes of the world are watching, they may be moved to do the right thing.

Let me take the opportunity to highlight the case of dual British-Iranian national, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has been detained in Iran since April. The legal process to which Nazanin has been subjected has been so flawed that it is nonsensical to make reference to it, or to the outcome of any such process. Kamal Foroughi is another dual national who has been imprisoned on spurious charges on the basis once again of a highly deficient process. These are arbitrary detentions. Indeed, I would go further and say that these individuals are, in effect, being held hostage. Therefore ask the Government publicly and unequivocally to call for their release.

As for specific country situations, it is important to mention the current plight of Government critics and the Kurds in Turkey. I know that the Turkish Government have had to deal with a savage coup attempt this summer, but I fear that their current repressive response will serve only further to alienate large swathes of the population and result in further bloodshed. Thousands of alleged coup sympathisers are in jail, and tens thousands of them, including soldiers, judges and teachers are being forced out of their jobs. According to the latest annual survey compiled by the Committee to Protect Journalists,
Turkey is currently the top jailer of journalists in the world. In a two-month period, the Turkish Government, led by President Erdogan, detained more than 100 journalists and closed down at least 100 news outlets. As of 1 December, at least 81 journalists were in detention in Turkey.

Although the crackdown against journalists has been exacerbated by the coup, media freedom was already under siege earlier in 2016. As the Committee to Protect Journalists points out, authorities are arresting, harassing and expelling journalists and shutting down or taking over news outlets. In a report in December, Amnesty International highlighted that an estimated half a million people are being forced out of their homes in the south-east of Turkey as a result of a brutal crackdown by the Turkish authorities over the past year, which might amount to collective punishment.

To compound the situation, the targeting of Kurdish opposition voices, including leaders and MPs of the opposition HDP party who have been arrested and detained following the coup attempt, has meant that opposition voices, including leaders and MPs of the opposition HDP, have now been shut down. Displaced residents have rejected Government claims that the ongoing curfew in the terrorist-populated areas has ended. Journalists points out, authorities are arresting, harassing and detaining journalists and shutting down or taking over news outlets. In a report in December, Amnesty International highlighted that an estimated half a million people are being forced out of their homes in the south-east of Turkey as a result of a brutal crackdown by the Turkish authorities over the past year, which might amount to collective punishment.

I would like to take this opportunity to relay my concerns about Egypt. Since 2013, when al-Sisi led the military overthrow of President Morsi, the authorities have prosecuted and jailed thousands for peaceful opposition to the Government. Under al-Sisi, a wide range of activities protected under the Egyptian constitution and international law have been interpreted as threats to national security. In the CPJ report, Egypt is ranked third in the world in terms of the number of jailed journalists.

Human Rights Watch has also highlighted the possible introduction of an NGO law, which would effectively prohibit independent NGOs in the country, by subjecting their work and funding to control by Government authorities, including powerful security agencies.

Jim Shannon: We all know of the horrific recent attack on a Coptic church in Cairo. Islamic terrorists attacked people because of their religious beliefs. Does the right hon. Lady join me and others in this House in supporting the Egyptian Government’s efforts to contain ISIS terrorists in Egypt?

Ann Clwyd: I agree that it was a dreadful attack, and we deplore any attacks on people because of their religion.

Human Rights Watch has also highlighted the possible introduction of an NGO law, which would effectively prohibit independent NGOs in the country, by subjecting their work and funding to control by Government authorities, including powerful security agencies.

There are also continuing concerns about Eritrea.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The right hon. Lady rightly talks about the difficulties in Eritrea, but I remind her that we are very time-limited. The House must adjourn at 9.14 pm, which is only eight minutes away, and I am sure she wants to hear what the Minister has to say.

Ann Clwyd: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yes, I would certainly like to hear what the Minister has to say, but Eritrea is a matter of continuing concern, and I would like to mention the case of the G11, which I and others have been campaigning on for many years, including in connection with the Inter-Parliamentary Union Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians.

In September 2001, 11 Eritrean MPs were arrested after calling publicly for democratic reforms. They have not been heard of since. I would again ask the UK and the international community to do more to help establish the fate of the G11, as well as to convince the Eritrean Government to end indefinite military conscription once and for all.

Finally—very briefly, Madam Deputy Speaker—I would like to highlight the work of the all-party group on human rights, which I chair, and whose members include hon. Members present tonight. It has worked since its inception in 1976 to raise greater awareness of international human rights violations. I thank MPs and peers who are members for their continued commitment to, and support for, our work and our aims.

As my parting shot, I will end by reminding the Minister and my colleagues that we often pay the price for our lack of action, our indecision, or even our indifference. As Syria so graphically illustrates, a repressive country, even if seemingly far away, can ultimately affect us all, whether we like it or not.

9.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on securing the debate and pay tribute as others have, to her long-standing contribution to this House’s work on human rights, not least in her present capacity as chair of the all-party group on human rights and as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I am also grateful for the contributions of other hon. Members.

The defence of human rights is a fundamental building block of British foreign policy. There are three reasons for this: first, respect for human rights is embedded in our national DNA; secondly, it is enshrined in international law; and, finally, it is firmly in our national interest.

This debate coincides with the week in which International Human Rights Day falls. I am pleased to inform the House that in the run-up to that day and on the day itself, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s network of embassies and high commissions organised, and took part in, a wide range of activities that illustrate the importance we attach to human rights.

The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) asked whether there was a mute button on human rights. I assure him that is not the case. Our human rights work is not just about celebrating International Human Rights Day. For Her Majesty’s Government, there are 365 human rights days every year, and in a leap year 366.

FCO Ministers regularly raise human rights issues with our international partners in private and in public. I could cite a whole range of examples of that, but I recently took part in the latest meeting of the UK-China
bilateral dialogue on human rights. All our diplomatic missions are alive to the importance of human rights, and every desk officer in London follows the human rights situation in their particular country. To those who suggest that we have downgraded the importance of human rights, I say that that is simply not the case. The right hon. Member for Cynon Valley raised the question of whether we view trade as somehow more important than human rights, but trade and human rights are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are mutually supportive.

Human rights are broad and complex. Each country is at a different stage in its journey towards fulfilling them. Unfortunately, some are patently travelling in the wrong direction. Time does not permit me to enumerate all the different violations that concern us, but let me mention just two areas to which we are currently paying considerable attention. The first relates to civil society and pressures from autocratic Governments, and the other is modern slavery. A vibrant civil society helps countries to become more stable and prosperous than would otherwise be the case. When countries restrict civil society by clamping down on media freedom, stifling dissent or making it impossible for NGOs to operate, they are self-harming. As a country and as a Government, we do an enormous amount to support NGOs around the world. The right hon. Lady mentioned Amnesty International’s “Write for Rights” campaign, and Amnesty International’s long-standing pre-eminence as one of the world’s leading human rights organisations is built on dedication and hard work over decades.

As for modern slavery, this Government are committed to taking a leading global role in the eradication of slavery by 2030, as set out in the UN sustainable development goals. The Prime Minister is leading this effort from the front, and all relevant Departments are co-ordinating their efforts to increase urgency in tackling the evils of trafficking and exploitation around the world.

Returning to the right hon. Lady’s point about Brexit and whether it will somehow undermine our human rights approach, let me be clear that it absolutely will not. The values that we share with our EU partners are universal, and we will remain human rights allies with our neighbours. As a global Britain, we have the opportunity to forge new partnerships for human rights.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) noted issues around the protection of minorities. Let me be clear that we continue to raise concerns about such protection, including of religious minorities, at a senior level with Governments around the world.

International Human Rights Day commemorates the signing of the universal declaration of human rights in 1948. That declaration remains an inspiring statement of shared values and pledges. It is a pleasure for us all to live in a country that espouses those values. Sadly, the world is still far from respecting all of them, and that is why we must continue to work for human rights through our foreign policy. Commemorating International Human Rights Day reminds us of the declaration that we made 68 years ago. It is a moment when we renew our determination to help to achieve the universal implementation of the pledges contained in that declaration.

Time has been limited in this debate, but I invite the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley and any Members in the Chamber to write to me and other colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. We will be happy to take on any issues that they have raised that I have not been able to deal with today.

Question put and agreed to.

9.14 pm
House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 14 December 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Electoral Commission

The Vice-Chamberlain of the Household reported to the House, That the Address of 1st November, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Sir John Holmes as the Chair of the Electoral Commission, with effect from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2020, was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

The Vice-Chamberlain of the Household reported to the House, That the Address of 1st November, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Dame Susan Bruce as an Electoral Commissioner, with effect from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2020, was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE AND THE CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Cyber-attack

1. Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the UK’s defences against cyber-attack. [907856]

6. David Mackintosh (Northampton South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the UK’s defences against cyber-attack. [907862]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): The persistence and ingenuity of those who would threaten us with cyber-attacks mean that we need to work even harder to keep pace with the threat. That is why we recently launched our five-year national cyber-security strategy—supported by £1.9 billion of investment—in which we set out ambitious steps to respond to that increasing cyber-threat.

Mike Freer: Many local firms struggle to afford the very best in cyber-protection. Will the Minister explain what more the Government could do to share their expertise so that local small and medium-sized enterprises could benefit from their experience?

Ben Gummer: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is a regrettable fact that, increasingly, cyber-security is an essential part of normal business operations. That is why we are trying to make it easier for small businesses. We have a new Cyber Essentials scheme, which helps businesses to understand what they need to do to protect themselves. We have a cyber exchange, which provides information about organisations and businesses, and directories that can help small businesses. We also have Action Fraud, which is the mechanism by which businesses can report malicious activity.

David Mackintosh: Will my right hon. Friend reassure the House that as well as protecting the nation’s vital infrastructure from cyber-attacks, the Government are taking appropriate steps to protect businesses and individuals from the threat of such attacks?

Ben Gummer: I can reassure the House. My hon. Friend rightly raises the issue of wider threats to infrastructure, and that was the purpose behind the setting up of the National Cyber Security Centre, where we bring together all the expertise across Government to make sure that we are protecting our national infrastructure. I am confident that we will be able to do that to a world-leading capacity.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): We know that Russian cyber-attacks had an impact on the US election, and that Russian bombing in Syria had an impact on Brexit. What assessment has MI5 made of cyber-attacks in relation to the Brexit output and, indeed, the Scottish referendum?

Ben Gummer: The hon. Gentleman will know that I cannot comment on the operational details of what the security agencies are doing, but he should be reassured that our agencies have some of the best capacities and capabilities in the world. They are being funded appropriately, we are making sure that they are doing what they need to do, and they are doing what they need to do.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): A cyber-attack earlier this month affecting several internet service providers resulted in more than 100,000 people across the UK losing their connection. With the economy becoming ever more reliant on digital infrastructure, what further resilience measures are the Government putting in place to protect not only businesses but consumers from such targeted attacks?

Ben Gummer: The hon. Lady is entirely right to point out the increasing threat, not only to organisations but to individuals as they live their normal lives. That is why the National Cyber Security Centre has been set up to engage with businesses very early—both on a proactive and a preventive basis, but also when there is a cyber-attack, as in the case that she cited—to ensure that customers are alerted early, that something is done to protect them, and that we learn from such attacks and make sure that they do not happen again in other parts of the economy.

12. [907869] Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): Last week, the head of MI6 warned of a “fundamental threat” to Europe from hostile states that use cyber-attacks
as part of a package of measures to subvert the democratic process. Tackling this is vital for the future of our democracy. Are the Government fully prepared for and able to defend the UK from such attacks?

**Ben Gummer:** We are. It would not be for me to add to the words of the director general of the Secret Intelligence Service, but it is important that we protect the integrity of our democracy. My hon. Friend can be assured that all agencies in this country are apprised of the necessity of doing precisely that.

**Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): In the light of the Russian intervention in the US election and the credible threats to the German election recognised by Chancellor Merkel, will the Minister give the House a guarantee that no cyber-attacks have been carried out on the UK that could have impacted on our democracy? Will he also inform the House what measures, in addition to the cyber-security strategy, his Government will be implementing to defend the UK from such attacks in the future?

**Ben Gummer:** I am gratified by the fact that the Electoral Commission says that our register is one of the most accurate and secure in the world, but we clearly need to protect the entire integrity of the democratic process. That is why all security agencies will be making sure that our systems are as secure as possible. I am grateful to the people working in the National Cyber Security Centre for the work they do—a lot of it is very difficult and technical—which is why we are better protected than most countries around the world. I intend to make sure that that capability and capacity improve and increase.

**Departmental Plans: Joined-up Government**

2. **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps he is taking to use single departmental plans to ensure joined-up and efficient Government. [907857]

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General** (Ben Gummer): Single departmental plans represent the Government’s planning and performance management framework. SDPs help the Cabinet Office to ensure that Departments deliver the Government’s key priorities, track progress against manifesto commitments and encourage greater efficiencies in Government.

**Helen Whately:** The five-year forward view for mental health encourages the Cabinet Office to oversee cross-Government implementation of proposals. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to make sure that mental health is a priority for each Department?

**Ben Gummer:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter, which I know is very close to her heart and is one in which she has expertise. It is very important that we co-ordinate this matter across Government because it is not just a matter for the Department of Health, although I should say that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is taking this as a personal issue, as is the Prime Minister. Our purpose in the Cabinet Office is to make sure that the decisions and recommendations that the Prime Minister will make in due course are implemented across Government, so that there is a response from across the Government by the whole of the Government to something that affects everyone in this country.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister referred to the benefits of joined-up and efficient Government. For those benefits to be seen and enjoyed by citizens across the United Kingdom, will he make a commitment to ongoing discussions with all the devolved legislatures to ensure that best practice is seen and enjoyed by everyone, irrespective of where they live in the UK?

**Ben Gummer:** I will. We can learn a great deal from each other.

**Special Advisers**

3. **Philip Boswell** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): If he will take steps to reduce the cost of special advisers. [907856]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office** (Chris Skidmore): Special advisers play an important part in supporting Ministers to deliver their priorities. The Government are committed to making the most efficient use of public money. As part of that, we will keep under review the cost of the civil service, which includes special advisers.

**Philip Boswell:** The Prime Minister has introduced a salary cap for special advisers, but The Times has reported that her own special advisers are not subject to the cap. How do the Government plan to reassure the public that the costs of special advisers are being controlled?

**Chris Skidmore:** We are required by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 to publish an annual report on the number and cost of special advisers, and we will publish an updated list shortly. We will provide information about the pay bands of special advisers, as well as the actual salaries of the more senior ones. We will also provide the total pay bill for special advisers and severance costs, including the severance payments made to the special advisers who recently left the Government.

**House of Lords**

4. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What plans the Government have to bring forward legislative proposals to reduce the number of members of the House of Lords. [907859]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office** (Chris Skidmore): The Government are clear that the House of Lords cannot continue to grow indefinitely. However, comprehensive reform of the House of Lords is not a priority for this Parliament, as set out in the Government’s manifesto, given the number of pressing priorities—hon. Members know what they are—elsewhere. Of course, where measures can command consensus across the House, the Government will welcome working with peers to look at how to take them forward.

**Jeff Smith:** Even the House of Lords now thinks the House of Lords is too big, so how can it be the Government’s priority to reduce the elected house by 50 Members, when under David Cameron the Lords expanded by 260?
Chris Skidmore: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the excellent debate that took place in the other place on 5 December, in which 61 noble Members took part over six hours. It was clear that there was a consensus among all political parties, as there is a consensus among all political parties in this House, that the size of the Lords is an issue that will have to be addressed. Our manifesto commitment set out very clearly that it was not a priority. When it comes to the boundary changes, our manifesto commitment to reduce the number of constituencies from 650 to 600 is critical as it will save £66 million across a Parliament and, crucially, equalise constituencies that for decades have remained unequal.

Mr Speaker: I do not think anyone is concerned about the size of Lords, but possibly they are about the size of the House of Lords. It is quite important to be accurate about these matters.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that while reform of the House of Lords might not be a priority at the moment, if their lordships try to frustrate the will of the British people over Brexit, reform of the House of Lords should become a top priority?

Chris Skidmore: I refer again to the debate that took place last week, in which an interesting consensus developed. Baroness Evans, the Leader of the House of Lords, said in her summing up:

“It is right that we collectively seek a solution to address concerns about the size of this House raised today while ensuring we continue to refresh and renew our expertise and our outlook so we remain relevant to the Britain of today and the future.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 5 December 2016; Vol. 777, c. 591.]

I look forward to hearing more about the development of those plans.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): How can the Government justify having more than 800 unelected Members of the House of the Lords and reducing the elected House of Commons from 650 Members to 600? There are that many people in the House of Lords that they are running short of toilets.

Chris Skidmore: I am not sure about the toilets issue, but the Labour peer, Baroness Taylor of Bolton—a colleague of the hon. Gentleman with whom I am sure he often agrees—commented that while there are 845 Members of the House of Lords, average attendance is around 497. I am not sure what that does to the situation with the toilets.

Let us come back to the boundary changes. The hon. Gentleman has been around for a long time. He knows that when we look at the size of the constituencies in this House, we see that some have 95,000 constituents and some have 38,000. That discrepancy was first picked up on by the Chartists—he may have been around at that time. Two hundred years ago, a working-class organisation demanded change and we are the party that will deliver it.

Mr Speaker: We are very grateful to the Minister for his history lesson, which I accept he is in a good position to provide, but we must move on.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): We have heard a great many words from the Minister. Why can he not understand that it is simply untenable to have a bloated revising Chamber with substantially more Members than this elected Chamber? This comes at a time when, as we have heard, he is ploughing ahead with his plans to reduce the size of this place. He might not think that reform of the House of Lords is a priority, but their lordships do, so what is he going to do about it?

Chris Skidmore: As I stated in a previous answer, it is up to the House of Lords to command cross-party consensus in that House. Labour Members of the Lords are willing to get involved with that. But let us talk about priorities, as the language of priorities is the language of politics. Our priority is to ensure that we deliver the will of the British people in leaving the European Union. The Labour party’s priorities seem to be frustrating the Brexit process and demanding we
take up our entire legislative time reforming the House of Lords. If we are looking at who should be getting their priorities straight, the hon. Gentleman should look at himself.

**Government Services Online**

5. **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve the accessibility of Government services online.  

**Ben Gummer:** We are already the world leader. We have the finest Government digital services in the world. It is not just us saying that but comparable organisations around the world. But we can still do better, and there is a great deal that I want to do. I urge my hon. Friend to look out for the forthcoming strategy on this precise matter.

**Topical Questions**

T1. **Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (UKIP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**Ben Gummer:** The purpose of the Cabinet Office is to deliver a democracy that works for everyone, to support the design and delivery of Government policy, and to deliver efficiencies and reforms to make Government work better.

**Mr Carswell:** Since 2008, many Select Committees have held pre-appointment hearings for aspiring quangocrats. Will the Minister consider making it routine for Select Committees to hold formal confirmation hearings, especially when the position requires substantial control over taxpayer money?

**Ben Gummer:** I am not quite sure why the hon. Gentleman needs to phrase every question he asks with an insult. I know that he should look closely at our work on ensuring that Select Committees have even more influence in scrutinising Government policy. I will take his careful and wise comments on board.

T5. **Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend please update the House on what progress he has made in creating a single point of complaint for users of public services?

**Chris Skidmore:** As part of our commitment to a democracy that works for everyone, I have been touring the country and investigating how we can get more young people actively engaged in politics, and I held a roundtable with youth organisations last week to discuss our strategy, but the Northern Ireland example is not something we wish to take forward, as the idea of compulsion on schools does not work. I have learned
Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Both Ministers have talked about creating a democracy that works for everyone, so will they look further at making sure that first past the post is rolled out for mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections?

Chris Skidmore: I sat in on my hon. Friend’s ten-minute rule Bill, which I listened to with intent, but while the Government are absolutely committed to first past the post as an electoral system, as set out in our manifesto, we need to ensure that the conduct of elections set out in legislation is carefully managed.

Mr Speaker: John Cryer. Where is the feller? Dear, oh dear.

T9. [907879] Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I appreciate that this is a devolved matter, but surely there has to be a process for the Cabinet Office to hold the Northern Ireland Executive to account when £400 million of all our money is being wasted on the renewable heat initiative?

Ben Gummer: The hon. Gentleman says it is a devolved matter. It is rightly a devolved matter, and it would not be right for me to comment on it here.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Tomorrow this House will debate the Government’s broadband universal service obligation. Does the Minister agree that we must complement the excellent work of the Government Digital Service with a real commitment to superfast broadband wherever we can take it?

Ben Gummer: It is right, which is why our manifesto was the most ambitious of all the main parties for the roll-out of superfast and ultrafast broadband, and my hon. Friend will hear a lot more about it in the weeks to come.

**PRIME MINISTER**

The Prime Minister was asked—

**Engagements**

Q1. [907841] Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 14 December.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Peter Dowd: May I take the opportunity to wish you, Mr Speaker, and all Members of the House a merry Christmas and a happy new year?

In the light of the Foreign Secretary’s display of chronic “foot in mouth” disease, when deciding on Cabinet positions, does the Prime Minister now regret that pencilling “FO” against his name should have been an instruction, not a job offer?

The Prime Minister rose—
Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. We have heard the question, but I want to hear the Prime Minister’s answer.

The Prime Minister: I join the hon. Gentleman in wishing everybody a happy Christmas. I will of course have an opportunity to do that again on Monday, when I am sure the House will be as full for the statement on the European Council meeting. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] Funny, that seemed to come from this side of the House but not from the Labour side. I have to say that the Foreign Secretary is doing an absolutely excellent job. He is, in short, an FFS—a fine Foreign Secretary.

Q4. [907703] Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Rugeley has a really bright future ahead—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear the voice of Cannock Chase.

Amanda Milling: Rugeley has a really bright future ahead, but only if we are ambitious, bold and visionary in our redevelopment plans. Will my right hon. Friend outline how the Government’s industrial strategy can create the conditions that will help us to build a sustainable local economy and highly skilled jobs for future generations?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that communities across this country have a bright future ahead of them, but we need to ensure that we create the conditions for that future. That is why we will be producing a modern industrial strategy that will show how we can encourage the strategic strengths of the United Kingdom and deal with our underlying weaknesses. It will enable companies to grow, invest in the UK and provide those jobs for the future, but we also need to make sure that that prosperity is spread across the whole of the United Kingdom and is prosperity for everyone.

Jeremy Corbyn: Islington North (Lab): May I start by wishing you, Mr Speaker, all Members of the House and everyone who works in the House a very happy Christmas and a prosperous new year?

Sadly, our late colleague Jo Cox will not be celebrating Christmas this year with her family. She was murdered and taken from us, so I hope the Prime Minister will join me—I am sure she will—in encouraging people to download the song, which many Members helped to create, as a tribute to Jo’s life and work and in everlasting memory of her.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this issue. I am sure that everybody in this House would wish to send a very clear message: download this single for the Jo Cox Foundation. It is a very important cause. We all recognise that Jo Cox was a fine Member of this House and would have carried on contributing significantly to this House and to this country, had she not been brutally murdered. It is right that the Chancellor has waived VAT on the single. Everybody involved in it gave their services for free, and I am having a photograph with MP4 later this afternoon. Once again, let us encourage everybody to download the single.

Mr Speaker: For the benefit of those observing our proceedings from outside, I should state that the Prime Minister was, of course, referring to the outstanding parliamentary rock band MP4.

Jeremy Corbyn: I applaud the work of MP4, but for the benefit of air quality I am not a member of it! I thank the Prime Minister for her answer.

Social care is crucial. It provides support for people to live with dignity, yet Age UK research has found that 1.2 million older people are currently not receiving the care they need. Will the Prime Minister accept that there is a crisis in social care?

The Prime Minister: I have consistently said in this House that we recognise the pressures on social care, so it might be helpful if I set out what the Government are doing and the position in relation to social care. As I say, we recognise those pressures. That is why the Government are putting more money into social care through the better care fund, and by the end of this Parliament it will be billions of pounds extra. That is why we have enabled the social care precept for local authorities. We recognise that there are immediate pressures on social care. That is why this will be addressed tomorrow by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in the local government finance settlement. We also recognise that this is not just about money; it is about delivery. There is a difference in delivery across the country. We need to make sure that reform is taking place, so we see best practice in the integration of health and social care across the country. We also need to ensure that we have a longer-term solution to give people reassurance for the future that there is a sustainable system that will ensure that they receive the social care they need in old age. That is what the Government are working on.

There is a short-term issue; there is medium-term need to make sure local authorities and the health service are delivering consistently; and there is a long-term solution that we need to find.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Care Quality Commission warned as recently as October that evidence suggests we have approached a tipping point. Instead of passing the buck on to local government, should not the Government take responsibility for the crisis themselves? Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to inform the House exactly how much was cut from the social care budget in the last Parliament?

The Prime Minister: We have been putting more money into social care and health. [Hon. Members: “How much?”] We have been putting more money in and, as I say, we recognise the pressures that exist. That is why we are looking at the short-term pressures on social care, but this cannot be looked at as simply being an issue of money in the short term. It is about delivery; it is about reform; it is about the social care system working with the health system. That is why this issue is being addressed not just by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, but by the Secretary of State for Health. If we are going to give people the reassurance they need in the longer term that their local care needs will be met, we need to make it clear that this is not just about looking for a short-term solution. It is about finding a way forward that can give us a sustainable system of social care for the future.
Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister does not seem to be aware that £4.6 billion was cut from the social care budget in the last Parliament. Her talk about putting this on to local government ought to be taken for what it is—a con. Two per cent. of council tax is clearly a nonsense; 95% of councils used the social care precept, and it raised less than 3% of the money they planned to spend on adult social care. Billions seem to be available for tax give-aways to corporations—not mentioned in the autumn statement—and underfunding has left many elderly people isolated and in crisis because of the lack of Government funding for social care.

The Prime Minister: Many councils around the country have taken the benefit of the social care precept and as a result have actually seen more people being able to access social care and more needs being met. Sadly, there are some councils across the country—some Labour councils—that have not taken that opportunity and we see worse performance on social care. The right hon. Gentleman once again referred to money, so I remind him that the then shadow Chancellor said at the last election that if Labour was in government there would be “not a penny more” for local authorities. When recently asked about spending more money on social care and where the money would come from, Labour’s shadow Health Secretary said:

“Well, we’re going to have to come up with a plan for that”.

Jeremy Corbyn: This Government have cut social care and the Prime Minister well knows it, and she well knows the effects of that. She also well knows that raising council tax has different outcomes in different parts of the country. If you raise the council tax precept in Windsor and Maidenhead, you get quite a lot of money. If you raise the council tax precept in Liverpool or Newcastle, you get a lot less. Is the Prime Minister saying that frail, elderly, vulnerable people in our big cities are less valuable than those in wealthier parts of the country?

This is a crisis for many elderly people who are living in a difficult situation, but it is also a crisis for the national health service. People in hospital cannot be discharged because there is nowhere for them to go. I ask the Prime Minister again: the crisis affects individuals, families and the national health service, so why does she not do something really bold: cancel the corporation tax cut and put the money into social care instead?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman referred to Newcastle City Council in his list. I have to say that Newcastle City Council is one of the councils that saw virtually no delayed discharges in September, so elderly people were not being held up in hospital when they did not need or want to be. That shows that it is possible for councils to deliver on the ground. Councils such as Newcastle and Torbay are doing that, but councils such as Ealing are not using the social care precept and the result is different. The difference between the worst performing council in relation to delayed discharges and the best is twentyfold. That is not about the difference in funding; it is about the difference in delivery.

Jeremy Corbyn: Councils across the country work hard to try to cope with a 40% cut in their budgets, and the people paying the price are those who are stuck in hospital who should be allowed to go home and those who are not getting the care and support they need. The social care system is deep in crisis. The crisis was made in Downing Street by this Government. The former Chair of the Health Committee, Stephen Dorrell, says that the system is inadequately funded. The current Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), said that

“This issue can’t be ducked any longer because of the impact it is having not just on vulnerable people, but also on the NHS.”

Why does the Prime Minister not listen to local government, the King’s Fund, the NHS Confederation and her own council leaders and recognise that this social care crisis forces people to give up work to care for loved ones because there is no system to do that? It makes people stay in hospital longer than they should and leads people into a horrible, isolated life when they should be cared for by all of us through a properly funded social care system. Get a grip and fund it properly, please.

The Prime Minister: The issue of social care has been ducked by Governments for too long. That is why this Government will provide a long-term sustainable system for social care that gives people reassurance. The right hon. Gentleman talks about Governments ducking social care, so let us look at the 13 years of Labour government. In 1997, they said in their manifesto that they would sort it. They had a royal commission in 1999, a Green Paper in 2005 and the Wanless report in 2006. They said they would sort it in the 2007 comprehensive spending review. In 2009, they had another Green Paper: 13 years and no action whatsoever.

Q11. [907851]Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Today, a constituent of mine from Shoreham will struggle to get to University College hospital, London, for life-saving cancer drug trials, and across Sussex thousands of others will be unable to get to work, to school or to college because ASLEF objects to their drivers on Southern operating the doors. Yet today, ASLEF drivers will be driving Thameslink trains on the same rails, operating the doors on the London to Brighton line. Can the Prime Minister give her assurance that everything will be done at the ACAS talks today to end this nonsense of a strike, address any residual safety issues and give our constituents their lives back?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. This is an appalling strike and he is right to raise the discrepancy in the attitude of ASLEF; we have seen driver-only operated trains on rail networks in the UK for decades and they are on Thameslink. I hope that the talks at ACAS are going to lead to an end to this strike, but I have a suggestion for the Leader of the Opposition, as he could do something to help members of the public. The Labour party is funded by ASLEF. Why does he not get on the phone and tell it to call the strike off immediately?

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): We join the leader of the Labour party and the Prime Minister in wishing great success to the Jo Cox single, which is available for download on Friday—I am sure we are all going to download it.

 Civilians have suffered grievously from the bombing of hospitals, schools and markets. The United Nations believes that 60% of civilian casualties are caused by
airstrikes. In the past 24 hours, the United States has stopped the supply of precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia to bomb Yemen. When will the UK follow suit?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we have a very strict regime of export licences in relation to weapons here in the United Kingdom. We exercise that very carefully, and in recent years we have indeed refused export licences in relation to arms, including to Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Angus Robertson: The US Government have just said that “systematic, endemic problems in Saudi Arabia’s targeting drove the US decision to halt a future weapons sale involving precision-guided munitions”.

The Saudis have UK-supplied precision-guided Paveway IV missiles—they are made in Scotland. The UK has licensed £3.3 billion-worth of arms to Saudi Arabia since the beginning of the bombing campaign. What will it take for the UK to adopt an ethical foreign policy when it comes to Yemen?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the intervention in Yemen is a UN-backed intervention. As I have said previously, where there are allegations of breaches of international humanitarian law, we require those to be properly investigated. We do have a relationship with Saudi Arabia. The security of the Gulf is important to us, and I would simply also remind him that Saudi intelligence—the counter-terrorism links we have with Saudi Arabia and the intelligence we get from Saudi Arabia—has saved potentially hundreds of lives here in the UK.

Q12. [90752] Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): One of my constituents has just had to move to residential care because no carers could be found to support her in her own home. She is at the sharp end of a crisis in social care that is as much about inadequate funding as it is about a shortfall in our very valued social care workforce. I am looking forward to hearing what immediate further support will be provided for social care, but is it not time that rather than having confrontational dialogues we are going to be able to address this issue. I was very pleased to have a meeting with my hon. Friend to discuss this last week, and I look forward to further such meetings.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of looking at a sustainable way in which we can support integrated health and social care, and a sustainable way for people to know that in the future they are going to be able to have the social care that they require. As I said earlier in response to the Leader of the Opposition, we recognise the short-term pressures that there are on the system, but it is important for us to look at those medium-term and longer-term solutions if we are going to be able to address this issue. I was very pleased to be able to have a meeting with my hon. Friend to discuss this last week, and I look forward to further such meetings.

Q2. [90784] Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): A cross-party delegation led by the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) will meet the Russian ambassador tomorrow morning to discuss Aleppo. We will reflect and amplify the sort of terms that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have used about Russia, the Assad regime and Iran, not least because we want to protect those who have heroically struggled to save lives in that city and who will now be at particular risk because of what they have witnessed. Does the Prime Minister accept that many of us believe that these messages are more cogent when we are equally unequivocal about the primacy of human rights and international humanitarian law when we meet the Gulf states?

The Prime Minister: We do raise the issue of human rights when we meet the Gulf states, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in relation to the role that Russia is playing in Syria. There is a very simple message for President Putin. He has it within his own hands to say to the Assad regime that enough is enough in Aleppo. We need to ensure that humanitarian aid is there for people and that there is security for the people who have, as the hon. Gentleman has said, been heroically saving the lives of others. I am sure that that is a message that he and others will be giving to the Russian ambassador. It is in President Putin’s hands; he can do it, why does he not?

Q14. [907854] Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): On the same subject, will the Prime Minister join me in thanking the many Members from all parts of this House who sung for Syrians last night in St Margaret’s, Westminster? Singing for Syria was created to pay the salaries of the medical staff in Aleppo. Since our hospital was bombed two weeks ago, we have been buying prosthetic limbs with all our money. We have a waiting list of 30,000 people. What can we do to target our humanitarian aid to ensure that it gets to the most vulnerable people in Syria—the old, the very young, and people who are too injured to move?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating everyone who took part in Singing for Syrians. I am sure the whole House welcomes the work that that group is doing and the money that it is raising and putting to extremely good use. The House was struck when she mentioned the number of people who are on the waiting list for prosthetic limbs. Our humanitarian aid support for Syria is the biggest such effort that the UK has made. Of course we are giving money to the refugees who have fled from Syria. We are also working diplomatically to try to reduce the suffering and to ensure that the sort of aid and medical support that she is talking about gets through to the citizens of Aleppo. We will continue to ensure that our humanitarian aid is being put to good use—helping those who are vulnerable and also helping those who need the education and support to be able, in due course, to rebuild Syria when it is stable and secure.

Q3. [907843] Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Rip-off interest rates on household goods are wrong. Companies such as BrightHouse exploit families who have no other way to furnish their homes. Will the Prime Minister look at capping those interest rates to help those who are just about managing?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. I recognise that there are many people who are just about managing and struggling to get by
who find themselves having to revert to support from companies that do, sadly, charge the sort of interest rates that he is talking about. Action has been taken in relation to some of those activities in the past, but I will look at the issue that he raised.

Q15. [907855] Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Across the country, and particularly in Kent, lorry fly-parking is a blight. It is antisocial and dangerous. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister support my campaign for more lorry parking spaces, more effective enforcement and, ultimately, a ban on lorries parking in unauthorised places?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern that my hon. Friend has raised; it is one that is shared by many Kent MPs who see this problem only too closely in their own constituencies. May I assure her that the Government share the desire to ensure that we do not see this fly-parking of lorries across Kent and that we do provide suitable lorry parking facilities in Kent? I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), is looking at this issue very carefully. I recognise, from my time as Home Secretary, the pressure that can be put on the roads, villages and towns in Kent at particular times. The Government are working on it, and we will find a solution.

Q5. [907845] Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Now we know, courtesy of the Government’s infrastructure watchdog, that mobile coverage in the UK is worse than in Romania, will the Prime Minister take steps to introduce a universal service obligation? In the highlands it is fairly typical to get the message, “No signal.” It would often be better to use carrier pigeons. Does the Prime Minister recognise that that is not acceptable, and will she take responsibility? It is time to connect the highlands to the rest of the world.

The Prime Minister: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the issue of decent mobile coverage does not only affect the highlands. There are parts of England, Wales and Northern Ireland that are also affected. The Government have very strong commitments in relation to this; we have very strong commitments in relation to broadband. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport will deliver on those.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Money cannot compensate someone who has been accused of a very serious criminal offence and who then finds that the details are in the press along with their name. Nothing, in truth, can restore their reputation after it has been trashed in those circumstances. In 2011, I tried to change the law with a private Member’s Bill. Today, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe said that it was time to introduce new legislation. Will the Prime Minister agree at least to consider changing the law so that everyone, with a few exceptions, has the right to anonymity if they are a suspect in criminal proceedings until such time as they are charged?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the interest that my right hon. Friend takes in this issue. She will know that it has been debated on a number of occasions in the House. The general assumption is that someone should not be named before the point of charge, but there is an allowance for the police to be able to raise someone’s name if it is a case where they believe that doing so will perhaps help other victims to come forward. This is of particular concern in matters of sexual violence—rape, for example—or where the police believe that the naming of an individual will help in the detection of the crime. This is a delicate issue, and I recognise my right hon. Friend’s concern. The College of Policing is looking at it very carefully, and is due to provide new guidance to the police in the new year in relation to the media.

Q6. [907846] Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The heart-breaking humanitarian crisis and genocide in Syria continue to take place as the world watches impotently, yet there is no end in sight. Does the Prime Minister agree with the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) that what is happening in Syria is a failure of western leadership, and does she agree with me that what is urgently required is what our dear friend, Jo Cox, called for nearly a year ago: a UK-led strategy to protect civilians, whether they are fleeing persecution, whether they are surrendering, or whether they are still besieged?

The Prime Minister: We must all take responsibility for decisions that we have taken, whether we take them sitting around the National Security Council table or, indeed, whether we take them in the House, with the decision it took in 2013. The hon. Lady raised the question of UK-led action in relation to the protection of civilians. The UK has been pressing for action in the United Nations Security Council, working with the French. The two most recent emergency UN Security Council meetings were called for by us, and the most recent took place yesterday. As she will know, there have been six UN Security Council resolutions which have been vetoed by Russia. The most recent was also vetoed by China. We continue to work with the United Nations, but if we are to get a solution that works on the ground other countries have to buy into it, and it has to be a solution that Russia buys into, as well as the regime.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I have received a message from Nick from Grantham—actually, it was a text message from our hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles). For the avoidance of doubt, this is one text message that he is willing to have read out in public. Other than getting rid of his tumour and making a swift return to this place, nothing matters more to him than ensuring that round-the-clock emergency services are restored to his local hospital in Grantham. Will my right hon. Friend receive the petition that he has organised, ensure that the passionate views of his constituents are heard, and above all reassure people in that rural area that they will always have access to safe emergency care for them and their families?

The Prime Minister: I am sure the thoughts of the whole House are with our hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), and I wish him the very best for his recovery as he goes through this illness. I recognise the strength of feeling he has about the emergency services in his local hospital. I believe that those concerns are shared by our new hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson).
I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford that the process that is taking place, which is looking at the development of local services, is about listening to local people, hearing the local voice and, above all, ensuring that the services available to people in their local area are the right services for that area and that they can be delivered safely and securely for local people.

**Q7. [907847] Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): At the last election the Conservative party manifesto said that “we will help local authorities keep council tax low for hardworking taxpayers, and ensure residents can continue to veto high rises”. Band D council tax payers in Ellesmere Port and Neston now face paying an extra £125 a year, with no veto, because of the Government’s failure to tackle the social care crisis. Will the Prime Minister now admit that her party’s pledge on council tax has been abandoned?

**The Prime Minister:** No. Obviously we have put the social care precept in place in recognition of the pressures on social care, but I am very pleased to say that we have seen many examples over the country of good local authorities ensuring that they are keeping council tax down, including the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, which cut council tax for six years running.

**Gareth Johnson** (Dartford) (Con): On 14 August my constituents George Low and Ben Barker were the victims of a vicious knife attack in Ayia Napa. George Low, sadly, died later that day from his injuries. The two culprits fled to northern Cyprus, where they were arrested on unrelated matters. Despite representations made by the Foreign Office, one of those men was recently able to walk free, and it is feared that the second man will follow shortly. Will the Prime Minister do all she can to help bring justice for George Low and Ben Barker for what was an horrific, vicious attack that was completely without provocation and has been devastating for both their families?

**The Prime Minister:** I am sure all of us across the House send our deepest sympathies to the family of George Low, and our very best wishes to Ben Barker for a full recovery from the terrible injuries that he suffered as a result of what was, as my hon. Friend said, a violent and completely unprovoked attack. The case was raised most recently with the relevant Government by the Foreign Secretary during his visit to Cyprus on 30 November, and he set out clearly our desire to see those guilty of this attack brought to justice. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will continue to offer help and support to both families. We will continue to raise this issue, and I am sure the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will keep my hon. Friend informed of any developments.

**Q8. [907848] Mike Weir** (Angus) (SNP): The Arbroath smokie, along with many other food and drink products, has benefited greatly from the European Union’s protected geographical indication scheme. What guarantee can the Prime Minister give us that it will continue to get that protection, should we end up leaving the EU?

**The Prime Minister:** We will need to address such issues as we look at the arrangements that will be in place following our exit from the EU. I am sure everybody recognises the significance of the Arbroath smokie and other products from around the United Kingdom. At the end of his question the hon. Gentleman said “should we leave the EU”. I can tell him that we will be leaving the EU.

**Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): On 19 December 35 years ago, 16 people lost their lives in ferocious storms off the coast of west Cornwall. Eight of them were men from Mousehole, who had launched the Penlee lifeboat, the Solomon Browne, to rescue the crew of the Union Star. Thirty-five years later, this tragedy still haunts the village of Mousehole and West Penwith, and many people mark the anniversary every year. Will the Prime Minister join me in remembering these brave men and the loved ones they left behind, and pay credit to all our lifeboat men and women, who are prepared to risk their lives for those in peril on the sea?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I absolutely join him in marking the 35th anniversary of the Penlee lifeboat tragedy and in sending our sympathies to all those families who were affected, but also to the local community who were affected, as he has set out. I am sure everybody in this House would want to pay tribute to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution as well and the tireless work it does. As an island, it is important that we have that security and safety around our shores. The RNLI works tirelessly to protect people who, as he said, are in peril on the sea, and we pay tribute to it.

**Q9. [907849] Ms Gisela Stuart** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): The Prime Minister knows that I and colleagues from all parties on both sides of the House are keen to guarantee the rights of some 3 million EU and European economic area citizens in this country at the earliest possible date. This will be the largest administrative task the Home Office has ever undertaken. Could I encourage her to look at the report produced by British Future, which has some very practical suggestions on how the Home Office can implement this, and could I possibly even encourage the Home Secretary to update us on any progress made?

**The Prime Minister:** I say to the hon. Lady that I am keen to ensure that we can protect the rights of EU citizens living here, but I am also keen that the rights of UK citizens who are living in the EU are protected as well. The Home Secretary, I think, is aware of the proposals that have been put forward and is looking at them very carefully.

**Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): In October, hundreds of people from across Europe attended a neo-Nazi rally in Haddenham, a small village in my rural constituency. What steps is the Prime Minister taking to tackle racial hatred?

**The Prime Minister:** First of all, can we once again, from this House, send a very clear message that there is no place for racial hatred in our society? This is so important. The Home Office has done a lot of work on racial hatred and hate crime. It has published a hate crime action plan, which shows what we are going to be doing during the lifetime of this Government. Of course, earlier this week, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary...
proscribed the right-wing organisation National Action, which means that being a member of, or inviting support for, that organisation will be a criminal offence. It is important that we take every step we can to stop racial hatred in this country, and I was pleased to announce on Monday that Britain will be the first country in Europe to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of anti-Semitism.

Q10. [907850] Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Yesterday, I met the chief executive officer of Provident Financial, one of two FTSE 100 companies in Bradford—yes, outside London, right in the heart of the north,Provident being in my constituency. We agreed that for Bradford to fulfil the potential of its young people, we need to have better educational outcomes and better transport. We have been overlooked for too long, so can I invite the Prime Minister to come to, and meet the leaders of, my great city, and pave the way for long-overdue investment for Bradford?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right to raise the role that education plays in ensuring the futures of young people in Bradford. That is why I am pleased to say that there has been an increase of nearly 16,000 children in Bradford who have been at good or outstanding schools since 2010. We are taking action to ensure the quality of education, but I want to make sure that there are enough good school places for children across the whole country, and that is what our education consultation is about.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I came to Prime Minister’s questions today from an incredibly moving and powerful private session with the Work and Pensions Committee, where we talked and listened to victims of modern slavery who are now living in safe houses—I do not think I will ever forget it in my life. Please will the Prime Minister take her enthusiasm and the passion with which she drove this issue as Home Secretary and work with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions? These people are vulnerable. When they come to the jobcentre, so often their background and their cases are not understood. As with survivors of domestic violence, they need to be fast-tracked through the system. If ever vulnerable people needed the state to step up and support them, it is these people. Please can we do more?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Nothing brings home the absolutely horrific nature of the crime of modern slavery than actually sitting down and hearing the testimony of a victim. These people have, very often, gone through the most horrendous, dehumanising experiences. It is absolutely right that the Government brought forward the Modern Slavery Act 2015. It is right that we have been looking at how victim support is provided and at the national referral mechanism—a whole number of steps—and of course we will work with the DWP in looking at the support that is given. She makes an important point in referring to jobcentres, but of course it is not just about jobcentres. One of the things we need to do is to ensure that those in authority who come into contact with people who have been the victims of modern slavery are able to recognise the signs, and able to treat it in the right way and deal with people sensitively and sympathetically in an appropriate way.

Q13. [907853] Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I do not think the Prime Minister has any idea of the level of pain that rail passengers and businesses in Brighton and beyond are suffering. It is not just on strike days; this has been going on for well over 18 months. Given the failure of her passive Transport Secretary, who apparently has no intention of acting to deal with this utterly incompetent company, will she sack him, strip GTR of the franchise, and freeze fares for long-suffering passengers?

The Prime Minister: First of all, my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary has been taking steps in relation to the general performance of Southern railway. We have stepped in to invest £20 million specifically to tackle the issue and bring a rapid improvement in services. We announced Delay Repay 15 from 11 December for the whole of Southern railway, which will make it easier for passengers to claim compensation. We have announced that we will give passengers who are season ticket holders on Southern a refund for a month’s travel. We have been looking at the wider issue. The hon. Lady raises the question of the current strike. There is only one body responsible for the current strike, and that is ASLEF. This a strike by the trade unions, and she should be standing up and condemning that strike, because it is passengers who suffer.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The £1.5 billion of additional funding for the better care fund is both needed and welcome, but the problem is that this money is not available until 2019. Will my right hon. Friend therefore look at seeing whether some of this funding can be drawn down earlier than that in order to alleviate the pressure on social care in areas such as Devon, where there is a very high level of elderly people?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises an important point about the short-term pressures on social care. That is why the Government have been looking at what measures can be taken to alleviate those short-term pressures. As I say, my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary will be making a statement on the local government finance settlement tomorrow, but we do need to look at the medium-term issues of delivery and the longer-term reassurance that we can provide to people in ensuring that we have a sustainable system of social care that gives people the comfort of knowing that they will be cared for in their old age.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): May I join colleagues who urged people in this House and beyond to go out and buy the Jo Cox Foundation single by the excellent MP4, which is not just available on download but in hard copy for those of us who prefer that kind of thing?

Every day since the Brexit result on 23 June seems to have been a good day to bury bad news, and the worst news is in our social care and health systems: the daily wave of tragedies, indignities and near misses; the £2.5 billion shortfall in social care funding; and thousands of operations already cancelled. Yesterday the Secretary of State for
Health said that the NHS and social care needed more money, yet the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not offer a single extra penny for health or social care in the autumn statement. Which of the two does the Prime Minister agree with? Will she take this opportunity to provide health and social care with the money it needs this side of Christmas?

The Prime Minister: The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will be making a statement tomorrow on the local government finance settlement. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman waits for that statement.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Back in 2010, the overseas aid budget was around £7 billion a year. By 2020, it will have more than doubled to over £15 billion a year. The shortfall in social care funding by 2020 is estimated at about £2.5 billion a year. Surely the Government priority should be to look after the elderly, vulnerable and disabled people in our own country before we hand money over to other countries. Will the Prime Minister take some of that money—a small amount of that increase—from the overseas aid budget and spend it on elderly, vulnerable and disabled people in our own country? Surely charity begins at home.

The Prime Minister: I think it is absolutely right that the Government are taking steps on the pressures on social care here in the United Kingdom, but it is also important for us that we take into consideration those who are in different circumstances across the world. This Government’s record of ensuring that 0.7% of our GDP is spent on overseas aid is a record second to none. We should all be proud of the help and support that we are giving to people around the world who, often, are living in incredibly difficult circumstances. We look after old people here in the UK; we also take seriously that moral responsibility for people around the world.
National Funding Formula: 
Schools/High Needs

12.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the second-stage consultation on the Government’s proposals to create a national funding formula for schools, copies of which can be found on the gov.uk website.

Since 2010, this Government have protected the core schools budget in real terms overall, but the system by which schools and high needs funding is distributed now needs to be reformed, to tackle the historical postcode lottery in school funding. These crucial reforms sit at the heart of delivering the Government’s pledge to build a country that works for everyone, not just the privileged few.

Our school funding system as it exists today is unfair, opaque and outdated. The reality is that patchy and inconsistent decisions on funding have built up over many years, based on data that are sometimes a decade or more out of date. What has been created over time is a funding system that allows similar schools with similar students to receive levels of funding so different that they put some young people at an educational disadvantage. For example, a school in Coventry can receive nearly £500 more per pupil than a school in Plymouth, despite having the same proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium. A Nottingham school can attract £460 more per pupil than one in Halton, despite having the same proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium. As those figures demonstrate, our funding system is broken and unfair, and we cannot allow that to continue.

Our overall proposals for the principles and broad design of the schools and high needs funding system—as set out in the first stage of the national funding formula consultation by my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan)—were widely welcomed. Today we set out our response to that, and the final stage of putting in place a national funding formula.

First, we are proposing a consistent base rate for every pupil at primary and at secondary level, which steadily increases in value as they progress through the system between primary and secondary. This is the largest factor in the formula, accounting for more than £23 billion of annual core schools funding and more than 70% of the funding total.

Secondly, we are proposing to protect resources for pupils who come from disadvantaged families, and we are taking a broad view to target £3 billion of funding annually for those who are most in need of support. Our formula will prioritise not only children in receipt of free school meals but those who live in areas of disadvantage. That will help to support many more families who are most likely to be just about managing to get by.

That is alongside our broader commitment to maintain pupil premium funding for deprived pupils in full. That will be protected at current rates throughout the remainder of this Parliament. We have listened to the responses received to the first stage of the consultation, so our funding formula will include a factor for mobility to reflect the number of children who join a school mid-year. That is in response to London, which called particularly strongly for that in reply to the consultation. We will also protect small, rural schools, which are so important for their local communities, through the inclusion of a sparsity factor.

Thirdly, alongside a basic amount and an uplift for disadvantage, we will direct £2.4 billion in funding towards pupils with low prior attainment at both primary and secondary school to ensure they get the vital support they need to catch up with their peers. Our proposed reforms will mean that schools and local authorities all across England that have been underfunded for years will see their funding increase. Our proposed formula will result in more than 10,000 schools gaining funding and more than 3,000 receiving an increase of more than 5%. Those that are due to see gains will see them quickly, with increases of up to 3% in per pupil funding in 2018-19 and up to a further 2.5% in 2019-20.

At the same time as restoring fairness to the funding system, we are also building significant protections into our formula. No school will face a reduction of more than 3% per pupil overall as a result of the new formula, and none will lose more than 1.5% per pupil per year. For high needs funding, which provides local authorities with the money they need to deliver the extra support required by our most vulnerable children and young people—those with the most extreme special needs, whether they are in special schools or mainstream schools—we propose to allocate more than £5 billion a year in funding. That will mean that no local authority will see its funding reduce as a result of the introduction of the formula.

We also propose to give local areas a limited flexibility to redirect funding between their schools and high needs budgets, through agreement between the local authority and local schools, to support collaborative approaches to provision for special needs pupils. Those protections will allow all schools and local authorities to manage the transition to fairer funding while making the best use of their resources and managing cost pressures, ensuring that every pound is used effectively to drive up standards and has the maximum impact for the young people we are investing in. In addition, to support schools in using their funding to the greatest effect, we have put in place and continue to develop a comprehensive efficiency package.

As I said in my statement to the House on 21 July, I recognise the importance of this reform, which is long overdue. I am keen to allow the proper amount of time for all schools and stakeholders to have a chance to reflect on this detailed formula. The consultation will therefore be open for 14 weeks until 22 March, with final decisions to be made before summer next year. It is our intention that once we reach a final design, the national funding formula will properly be introduced in 2018-19. That will be a transitional year, during which local authorities will continue to set local schools’ funding formulae. In 2019-20 we will move to having our schools funding go directly to schools, so that the great majority of each school’s individual budget is determined on the basis of a single, national formula.

It is now time for us to consult on the more detailed design of the formula, so that with the help of the sector we can really get the national funding formula right. We are keen to hear as many views as possible, and I encourage Members and their constituents to scrutinise and respond to the detailed consultation.
documents that we are issuing. The proposals for funding reform will mean that all schools and local areas receive a consistent and fair share of the schools budget, so that they can have the best possible chance to give every child the opportunity to reach their full potential. Once it is implemented, the formula will mean that wherever a family lives in England, their children will attract a similar level of funding—one that properly reflects their needs.

The Government believe that the funding system that we propose will ensure our schools system works fairly, and I commend this statement to the House.

12.55 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): After many delays, the Secretary of State has finally come forward with the Government’s so-called fair funding formula. I thank her for advance sight of her statement and the raft of documents she sent me just half an hour ago.

If only the fair funding formula lived up to its name. Does the Secretary of State recall the commitment in her party’s manifesto to “continue to protect school funding”?

Does she accept that the National Audit Office has confirmed something that the Institute for Fiscal Studies had already told us, which she tried to ignore—that the Government will be cutting the schools budget by at least 8%, and that is not changed at all by today’s announcement? Does she remember that that same manifesto promised:

“Under a future Conservative Government, the amount of money following your child into school will be protected”?

The National Audit Office has made it clear that funding per pupil will also fall by 8%. Is the National Audit Office wrong, or is the new, unelected Prime Minister ripping up the manifesto that her predecessor put to the country?

The Secretary of State said that the so-called fair funding formula would mean that no school would lose more than 1.5% of its funding per year. How can she possibly reconcile that with the projections of schools facing actual cuts of up to double that and real-terms cuts of up to 10%? Can she tell the House how exactly she will ensure that that happens in practice?

The Secretary of State seems to believe that all these savings and all these cuts can be managed without having a catastrophic impact on the education of our children. Will she tell the House how exactly she will ensure that that happens in practice?

I have to say that I am absolutely staggered at that response from the shadow Secretary of State for Education. There is cross-party support for reforming the national funding formula and, from representing our constituencies, we all know that it is impossible to justify the current approach. It would have been better if we had had a more thoughtful response, rather than just a diatribe of political rhetoric, from the Opposition Dispatch Box.

On some of the points the hon. Lady tried to make, the reality is that we have been able to protect the schools budget—the core schools budget—in real terms. That is because we have a thriving economy, which is generating the taxes that mean we can continue to invest in our public services. She talked about fair funding, but did not seem to understand or to have listened to my statement. Perhaps she had already written what she wanted to say, and was not actually interested in the reality. The funding formula absolutely bakes in making sure that we have the right amount of funding for children from more disadvantaged areas. In fact, we have taken a broader definition of disadvantage to make sure that it is not only the children eligible for free school meals who will get additional support. We have also made sure that the formula builds in a strong focus on low prior attainment, so that the children who have fallen behind—we need to invest in and support them to catch up—get additional resourcing. Schools with more of them will get more.

I have to say that, based on the lack of engagement from the Labour Front Bench, I will sit down and give colleagues with more thoughtful questions a chance to ask them.
Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): I certainly welcome this statement, as will many parents across the country. It has been long awaited, as the Secretary of State conceded, but it has the right tone, the right context and, essentially, the right capacity to make the changes. It will also enable schools to plan ahead, which will be very good for all schools in terms of teacher recruitment and teacher retention, which we also need to address. Will she be sure to accommodate issues about the future of local government, because there will be some changes? This is a national formula, so the future of local government must be considered in that context.

Justine Greening: We are busy doing that already. I felt it was quite important, in the second-stage consultation, to recognise the need to understand how a little bit of local flexibility could help us to make sure that the formula works right on the ground. That is therefore part of the consultation I have set out. We have set out our plans for the 2018-19 transition year, and we are asking how we can look at this more carefully for future years. That is precisely why it is important for colleagues from both sides of the House to take the time to engage with the documents—there is a lot of data—we are publishing today.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): We would all agree with the aims of a fairer funding formula, but does the Secretary of State not recognise that she is delivering this in the context of dramatic and significant overall cuts to schools budgets? Even the so-called winners under her formula will also face school budget cuts. In a constituency such as mine, which is a loser under this formula—over 50% of children are living in poverty, which makes it the constituency with the second highest level of child poverty in the entire country—school budgets losing money will mean that one-to-one tuition will be going and catch-up classes will be going. Extra-curricular activities—the drama, the Shakespeare—and all the vital things I want kids in Moss Side and Moston to do will be going as a result of her funding crisis, aside from the announcement today.

Justine Greening: I encourage the hon. Lady to look at the detail in relation to her constituency. The documents will be published following the statement, as is the normal practice of the House, and I encourage her to look at them. Yes, we need to work with schools to help them to deliver efficiencies, but one thing we have learned over the years from such a divergent funding formula across schools is that many schools are able to deliver excellent and outstanding results on very different cost bases. That shows we need to be able to work with them to get more value out of the system and to make the investment we are putting into schools—core school funding is being protected in real terms over this Parliament—go as far as possible.

I would also say to the hon. Lady that, yes, the National Audit Office report flags up the cost pressures on schools, but there are of course cost pressures on introducing the living wage, for the lowest-paid workers in our country. Some of them work in schools, and they should benefit from the introduction of the living wage. There are additional employer contributions to teacher pension schemes, which will make sure we have sustainable pensions for teachers in the long run. I would have hoped that Labour Members welcomed such steps, but we will also work with schools to help them to achieve efficiencies.

Mr Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): I warmly welcome the statement. May I urge my right hon. Friend not to move from the very clear timetable she has set out for the formula’s implementation? It is very keenly anticipated and looked forward to by underfunded local authorities, such as mine in Trafford.

Justine Greening: I have set out a very clear timetable today. In spite of the fact that the Labour party clearly has no interest in having fair funding or funding that goes to the most disadvantaged children—the children who need to catch up—we will press on with this process.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Secretary of State is to be congratulated on grappling with this issue, but, as she has indicated, the devil is in the detail, and I look forward to looking at it. The education of 16 to 19-year-olds, who are in schools as well as in colleges, had a cut of 14% during the coalition Government. There is a big difference between what they get and what four to 16-year-olds and those at university get. What will she do about that funding crisis?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman and I share a deep interest in technical education and a passion for improving it. As he will know, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills is looking at how to implement a skills strategy that will make sure that our technical education system is at the same gold standard level that we are steadily ensuring our education system is reaching. We have protected per pupil core funding post-16, but we want to look at how to make sure that further education improves its attainment levels in the way that has happened across the broader systems.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): West Berkshire and Wokingham education authorities, which serve my constituency, are among those worst funded. They are finding it very difficult to keep their excellent education and their current teacher workforces going. We therefore welcome the statement. Will there be any transitional relief for 2017-18, because our financial need exists now?

Justine Greening: My right hon. Friend will know that the previous year’s transitional relief has been carried over to the forthcoming year. Beyond that, I am now setting out the steps we will take to make funding fairer. This is important, and despite the debate that will no doubt be kicked off on the back of this consultation, we just cannot accept a situation in which a similar child with similar needs has such a difference in funding put into their education and their school for no other reason than that they are in different places. This simply cannot and should not be accepted, which is why we are setting out our solution today.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of the transformation of London’s schools. In 1997 when Labour took power, schools in my constituency were among the worst. By
the time we left office, they were among the best, and that continued under the last Government. That transformation happened thanks to the London challenge and continued investment. Will the Secretary of State confirm that London’s achievement will not be damaged by this formula and that London’s schools will not lose the £260 million we have heard about? We need to learn from London’s success and replicate it in other parts of the country.

**Justine Greening:** I can reassure the hon. Lady that under the formula, London will continue to be well funded. Despite the percentage of children eligible for free school meals in London having fallen from 28% to 17% over the last 10 years, London still has some of the most deprived parts of our country. The funding formula will ensure that London still receives some of the best funding of any region for its schools. That is happening because it is appropriate, but what we cannot accept is that they are not London. It is time to ensure that we have a fair approach, but it is a fair approach for that they are not London. It is time to ensure that we attain not being funded for no other reason than challenges of deprivation and, additionally, low prior attainment not being funded for no other reason than that they are not London. It is time to ensure that we have a fair approach, but it is a fair approach for London too.

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): I wholeheartedly support this announcement. For too long, Swindon’s children have been short-changed by Labour’s hopeless funding formula. Change cannot come soon enough. I urge the Secretary of State to explore options on private finance initiative schemes, which are frustrating improvement plans in many of my local schools.

**Justine Greening:** That issue was raised in response to the phase 1 consultation, so we will ensure that the formula reflects the fact that there are PFI commitments that will continue in real terms. I have no doubt that that will be good news for my hon. Friend’s local area. Obviously, we do not want to perpetuate those schemes when they have steadily run down, but it is important to reflect the reality of those cost pressures on schools that are in that position.

**Stephen Twigg** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State listed a number of factors—mobility, disadvantage and prior attainment—that are crucial in many constituencies, particularly those in urban areas like the one that I represent. Will she give us more detail on how big a factor they will be, because that will determine how much constituencies like mine lose out? The concern in Liverpool is that, on top of the substantial cuts to local government funding, our schools will lose out at a time when they are finding it challenging to recruit teachers and headteachers.

**Justine Greening:** As the hon. Gentleman points out, in addition to the core base amount of funding, there is roughly a further 25% that is uplifted in relation to deprivation, additional needs and locational needs. Although mobility was not one of the original factors in the phase 1 consultation—in other words, this is the challenge that some schools and local areas face when children arrive during the year, as opposed to growth, which relates to steady demographic change and sometimes an influx between years—we recognised that it was important to reflect it in the formula. We have looked at the cost pressures that we think relate to mobility. We will initially base the 2018-19 formula on historical levels, because that is the one evidence base we have, but we will consider what is a sensible way to look at mobility going forward.

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): I welcome the statement. Gloucestershire County Council has been a poorly funded local authority, so this will be welcomed in my county. I welcome the fact that sparsity will be taken into account, which is important in rural constituencies like mine. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, based on the timetable she has set out, with the final position being reached in 2019-20, we will have delivered on our manifesto commitment to deliver fair funding in this Parliament?

**Justine Greening:** I believe we will have done so. We will have brought in a formula that works more effectively and we will have transitioned it in appropriately. I believe that it will be a big step forward, particularly for schools that have been so underfunded for so long.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is right that this kind of funding has to be upgraded and uprated over time. I certainly welcome that. However, is she also aware that it is the responsibility of this House to check the fairness of that over time through the Select Committee system and in this Chamber? Does she accept the implication that, overall, the challenges in our education system are grave when the chief inspector, who is about to retire, points out that so many bright children in our country, who grew bright through good primary schools up to the age of 11, are lost to education post-11? Will she do something about that? Will she also do something about the chief inspector’s deep worry that pupils in many of the big towns and cities in the midlands and the north are severely underperforming?

**Justine Greening:** The hon. Gentleman sets out some of the challenges that we continue to face in our education system. That is precisely why the national funding formula makes sure that resources go to schools that are in more disadvantaged areas and those that have cohorts of young people and children who are starting from furthest behind. That is not only the sensible approach; it is the right thing to do for those children and schools. For too long, that has not been built into the school funding formula. That is what we are trying to resolve today. This is the second stage of the consultation. There are 14 weeks for everyone to look at whether the way in which we have blended the different criteria is right. I think that it is.

In addition to what we are announcing today, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have launched six opportunity areas to look at how we can ensure that we have excellent education in those parts of the country where we still have not seen enough improvement.

**Mr Gary Streeter** (South West Devon) (Con): Both Plymouth and Coventry were bombed heavily during world war two, have areas of deprivation and have similar demographics. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that the discrepancy of £500 per pupil per year
simply cannot be justified? Her statement will be warmly welcomed. May I ask for maximum clarity at the earliest opportunity on what schools in my constituency will get in 2018 to help them prepare for the September 2017 budget, which is likely to be challenging?

**Justine Greening:** After the statement, we will publish a lot of detail in relation to individual schools. We will take the draft final formula and apply it to individual schools’ budgets, so all Members will be able to look at all the schools in their constituency and see, notionally and illustratively, how the formula will operate. Of course, when the funding formula comes in, it will apply against the up-to-date pupil numbers and pupil data, but we want to be very clear with the House about how it will work on the ground. I encourage all Members to look at the data for their own communities. They show that although no school will get exactly the same under the new formula as it has had in the past, it will be much fairer now.

**John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): Regardless of this statement, which is by no means all bad, it is indisputable that school overheads are going up and that more and more secondary schools will go into debt. Why are we continuing to squander money on pointless pet projects and restructuring? Surely that is a huge diversion now.

**Justine Greening:** I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have seen year-on-year improvements in our education system. As one of my predecessors said on the “Today” programme earlier this week, it is important that we continue the reforms we have already got under way. That is precisely what we will be doing.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I very much welcome today’s statement on behalf of schools in my Kent constituency, which are significantly underfunded and disadvantaged by the current formula. I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to a rapid introduction of the new formula. In the meantime, will she consider seriously whether there is any possibility of interim funding for schools until the new formula is introduced?

**Justine Greening:** As I said in reply to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), the additional uplift that was provided last year will continue into the forthcoming year, after which we will introduce the national funding formula in 2018-19. Today, we are coming forward with a fundamental solution to a long-term problem that has been building up not just over the last decade, but for 20 years—some people would argue it has been 30 years in the making. Now is the time, finally, that we sort this out.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm whether an area cost adjustment multiplier will be applied as a result of the new formula? The funding gap between the national average and what is received by schools in the north-east stands at £45 million a year. Will that gap increase or decrease as a result of the formula?

**Justine Greening:** The formula includes an area cost adjustment. It will be based on a hybrid measure that will look at not only general labour market costs but those relating to teachers, reflecting consultation feedback. It is also one reason why expensive parts of the country such as London will continue to be well funded, even under this formula.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Wishing the fellow a full recovery, I call Mr Julian Knight.

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome both the substance and the tone of the statement. Schools in Solihull receive £1,300 a year less per pupil than those in nearby Birmingham. As a result, we lose teachers to Birmingham. Will the Secretary of State assure me that at least some of that unfairness will be addressed during this Parliament?

**Justine Greening:** I have set out the timelines for the roll-out of this national funding formula. My hon. Friend sets out some of the by-products of the current unfair situation. That is another reason why it is important that we address that situation.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** It slightly pains me to call an Everton supporter today, but I do so nevertheless.

**Andy Burnham** (Leigh) (Lab): I will keep the gloating to a minimum, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State is dressing it up very well, but the reality of what she has announced is that some schools in the most deprived parts of the country, which face the biggest challenges, will have money taken away from them and given to schools elsewhere. Would it not have been much fairer for her to have asked the Chancellor for more money to bring the gap up that way? Instead, she is making schools in the toughest areas make teachers redundant to pay for this change.

**Justine Greening:** Again, there is a lot of rhetoric, but in the end the right hon. Gentleman does not seem to have listened to my statement, which was very clear that this funding formula absolutely reflects issues of deprivation and lower prior attainment, as well as local cost issues. It is a step forward in making sure that we have a much fairer approach than in the past. I do not think he would be able to justify the current situation to many parents who simply cannot understand why their children get less funding than other children purely because of where they grow up.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): Earlier this year, I held a roundtable for all the headteachers of primary and secondary schools across North Dorset. One big issue they raised was the recruitment and retention of staff in a rural area where living and other costs are higher, and all the rest of it. This announcement is very welcome. The sparsity quota that my right hon. Friend has referred to will be warmly welcomed by those headteachers. On their behalf, may I simply say, “Thank you”?

**Justine Greening:** I am grateful for that. As my hon. Friend points out, it is important that the formula reflects the very different challenges that schools face in very different situations and parts of our country. That is why the sparsity factor matters.
Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that schools all over the country are finding it difficult to recruit teachers because we are not training enough of them. For example, in Slough, where we do not get as much resource although we have exactly the same kind of challenges as inner London, headteachers are desperate. House prices in Slough went up faster than anywhere else in the country in the past year. Will she assure me that schools in my constituency will not face a cut as a result of this formula but will be rewarded for their brilliant work?

Justine Greening: The right hon. Lady should welcome the formula, because at the moment the flow of money into our schools is unfair. For a community such as hers, our proposed architecture for the national funding formula will make sure principally that funding is fair and there is an equal amount for children in primary and in secondary; then our main drivers of additional funding will be deprivation—as I said, £5 billion a year for that—and low prior attainment. That is the right way to structure the formula. Although we have seen progress in many schools in many parts of our country, we now need to make absolutely sure that resources flow towards those areas that need to lift.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The Minister for schools was kind enough to meet me recently to discuss funding for schools in Wealden and East Sussex, and I am very grateful for that. My pupil funding is just £4,433.58. My small rural schools face severe challenges because of their small size and location, and a heavy weighting for sparsity in the formula is therefore vital if we are to ensure that Wealden’s superb schools can carry on providing a brilliant education.

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When we looked at the national funding formula mechanism, we saw that some local authorities do not use the sparsity factor. Our sparsity factor will go to all schools that should get additional support. That is why the formula should be welcomed.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Children in my constituency start school up to 19 months behind where they should be in terms of development. Without fantastic teachers and extra resources, they struggle to fulfil their potential and play catch-up for the rest of their lives. Will the Secretary of State tell me and schools in my constituency whether they will see their funding increase—yes or no?

Justine Greening: There is a greater focus in this formula on low prior attainment, which should address the hon. Lady’s question.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Under the current funding formula, Kingston schools are the third worst funded in London, receiving £2,400 per pupil per year less than Tower Hamlets, which is just 14 miles away. Having campaigned for changes and for fairer funding with teachers, parents and councillors, I look forward to responding to the phase 2 consultation. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the mobility factor that I and other London MPs called for recognises the very real pressure that London and other urban and suburban schools face from children joining mid-term in large numbers?

Justine Greening: I think it can. Obviously, my hon. Friend will want to look at the detail in the consultation, but under this formula we will put £23 million into supporting children who move in-year and their schools. As a London MP, I know that has been an issue for some London schools. But it is not just an issue for London; there was a general response to the phase 1 consultation document saying that we needed to put the issue into the phase 2 consultation and that it should be made part of the formula. That is why we have done so.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for schools for listening to the case for adding mobility to the school funding formula and to the Secretary of State for her announcement; I will look carefully at the details. Should she not have secured the Chancellor’s support to make sure that no school sees a cut in its funding per pupil, given the cost pressures that she has referred to?

Justine Greening: I make two points. In spite of the need to reduce the deficit over time, which the Government have set about doing, we have protected the core schools budget in real terms. In addition, I recognise that there is a need to reduce the year-on-year reductions schools faced, so those will be no more than 1.5%. Indeed, the overall reduction for any per-pupil amount will be no more than 3%. I hope the right hon. Gentleman will welcome that.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Following on from that point, there is a similar fair funding formula in the health service, but Wellingborough is always at the bottom. It never catches up because we are not prepared to reduce the money that the best funded get. I am slightly worried that my right hon. Friend’s answer suggests that that sort of thing will creep into the school system. Are we actually ever going to move to the formula—are schools actually going to get the cash that the formula says they will?

Justine Greening: In the transition year, some schools that are so far behind as to be eligible will get 3%; those schools that are even further behind under the fair formula will get a further 2.5% the following year, when the formula operates in full and properly. My hon. Friend is right to flag up the issue. It is important that the schools that have been underfunded see those gains coming through. That is what we are proposing.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Schools in areas such as Westminster have a combination of exceptionally high costs—not least recruitment and retention—and very high deprivation, and they are already making staff redundant. The Secretary of State partially blamed policies such as the introduction of the national living wage. Why are the Government introducing policies impacting on schools that they are not prepared to fund?

Justine Greening: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady supports the living wage, but the Government think that it is important. We also think a further two things, however: first, it is important to introduce this...
national funding formula—I hope that MPs can support it as a mechanism to make sure that the funding flowing into schools is delivered fairly—and secondly, it will ensure that children growing up in deprived areas will receive additional funding. I hope that she will reflect on that. In addition, wherever they grow up—whether or not in a deprived community—children who need to catch up will receive additional funding through this formula.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. One group we must not overlook is parents. In my constituency, parents work hard and often tell me, “I’m paying the same rate of tax as people in other areas. Why am I getting so much less money for my children in the state school system?” I urge her, when she gets the backlash from the more generously funded areas, to stand fast, particularly on support for rural schools, and to deliver this in full and in practice.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I represent the 19th most disadvantaged constituency in the country—the Secretary of State spoke about disadvantage and deprivation—but can she tell parents and schools in my constituency whether they will receive more funding under this proposed formula or less?

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): For decades, Staffordshire has languished 15 places from the bottom on funding. I have heard this all before, from Tony Blair and the unelected Prime Minister—as the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) so charmingly put it—Gordon Brown, so I thank my right hon. Friend for coming up with a firm date for these reforms. Will she assure me that the children of Staffordshire will no longer be disadvantaged?

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Schools in my constituency are among the lowest funded in the country, so we will look with interest at what the Secretary of State is proposing, but those schools are struggling now because of the Government’s actions: cuts to the education services grant have taken money out of the dedicated schools grant; schools are being inadequately funded under legislation on additional need; and our high-needs block is very underfunded. What will she do to assist these schools now, before the new funding formula comes in and before even more damage is done to the education of children at school now?

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I welcome today’s statement. Hampshire is the third lowest funded local authority in the country and faces significant pressures—it needs 9,000 extra secondary school places by 2025 and 40% of its school estate is largely un-upgraded since the 1960s. Does the Secretary of State agree that today’s proposal will address the single biggest factor causing the disparities around the country—the historical nature of the funding formula—and will restore equality and fairness to the system?
Justine Greening: Yes, I do. The old formula was arbitrary at both central Government and local authority level, which, as the formulae were set, baked in a second set of imbalances. It is now time to tidy that up and—critically—to make it fair and equal wherever children are.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows that Nottingham schools face enormous challenges in raising education standards in a city with high deprivation. School leaders are already telling me they are struggling to cope and having huge difficulties recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. We know that all schools are facing a real-terms cut in funding, but how does she think headteachers, staff, parents and pupils in Nottingham will feel when she says it is fair that their schools are being cut even deeper to fund increases in other places?

Justine Greening: I do not think that anybody can argue in favour of a system that is simply a postcode lottery and in which there is very little, if any, relationship between, on the one hand, the needs of a school and the underlying cost base of where it is operating, and, on the other hand, how much the school and the child get in funding. We are today setting out a formula that genuinely addresses that. It is a 14-week consultation, so there is plenty of time for Members to look at the impact on their local area and then take part in that consultation. I hope that MPs will do that.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): May I warmly welcome today’s statement on behalf of schools in Nottinghamshire, which have been poorly funded for a long time? In particular, does my right hon. Friend agree that this is part of addressing the lazy assumption that there is no deprivation in rural areas and counties? Counties such as Nottinghamshire and towns such as Newark have pockets of extreme deprivation—in former coalfield communities such as Ollerton and in Ashfield and Mansfield—and it surprises me that Opposition colleagues do not recognise that.

Justine Greening: I agree strongly with my hon. Friend. The funding formula now enables us to take a proper, validated, evidence-based approach, including to deprivation, which was often driven by data that were 10-plus years out of date. It is time to fix that, and that is what we are launching today.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State recognise and understand the grave concerns of schools in my constituency and across Cumbria with above-average numbers of children with high needs that the change to the funding formula for teaching assistants, which will require schools to fund the first 10 hours rather than the first eight, will significantly impact existing budgets and mean cuts in those schools? Is it not the case that the proposed floor for maintaining the existing budget will be of little help if the current numbers of high-needs pupils continue to rise?

Justine Greening: I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to look at the consultation. Alongside having an element of funding for local areas based on historic spend levels, which vary, we will look at population and needs within that as strong proxies for understanding how much funding we think should flow to different places. That will put us in a much fairer position, but as I have set out clearly, as part of that we will also ensure that no area will lose any funding as part of the transition.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Having wrestled with the education funding formula in local government for 20 years before I was elected to this place, I welcome the principle of fair funding, and in particular sparsity and the other elements contained within it. However, as a fellow London MP, my right hon. Friend will know that the cost of living in London is much higher than in the rest of the country. With 85% of a school’s budget typically spent on staffing, the need to pay staff extra salaries for recruitment and retention is paramount, so will she outline what extra money will be given to cover the cost of living and to protect schools from losing money?

Justine Greening: The area cost adjustment should enable us to do that effectively. As I have said, it is not based just on overall labour cost assumptions; it is based on cost assumptions in relation to teachers more specifically, so it should enable us to reflect that in the funding formula that we have now put in place. My hon. Friend will of course have a chance to respond to the consultation, but that is what we have tried to do.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I am grateful for the Secretary of State’s statement. Will she explain the flexibility between local authorities? For example, in 2010 the funding for children’s services in Haringey, one of London’s poorest boroughs, was £102 million and in 2017-18 it will be £46 million, although the population has grown and the children are no less needy. How does she see that interplaying, and will she explain how it will be addressed in the consultation?

Justine Greening: I was talking about two flexibilities in the consultation. They include, in relation to the high-needs fund that we are now consulting on, the ability for local authorities that will still receive high-needs funding to share some of that with mainstream schools, if they feel that is a better way of operating to provide for special needs locally. Of course, some special needs children are in mainstream schools and some are in special schools. We wanted to include an additional flexibility for 2018-19, so that where there is agreement locally that the funding should flow the opposite way—from the schools budget into high needs, perhaps because of the way that special needs are delivered locally—that should be possible if there is overall agreement from the majority of schools. That is what we are consulting on. We want to look at whether there is a longer-term approach, but the whole point of the second-stage consultation is to get feedback on those proposals.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the statement on fairer funding for schools. It is not right that constituencies such as mine have a £2,000 difference per pupil compared with other constituencies. I noted with interest that the Secretary of State identified as one of the reasons the fact that the data are a decade out of date, so going forward it is fundamental that we have the correct data, particularly in areas of high growth. Will she assure me that the data
will be collected sufficiently late in the year, so that we know the accurate figures per pupil for the following school year.

**Justine Greening:** As part of the figures for deprivation we will be using IDACI—the income deprivation affecting children index—which essentially looks at how deprivation affects children in particular. It was last updated very recently, so it gives us a fresh database to use. In relation to broader pupil cohort characteristics, the census is updated in October every year and that feeds into the following academic year’s funding formula details. Those two things should mean that we have up-to-date data to feed in.

**Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab):** Is it not the case that this reform of the funding formula, which many of us agree needs to happen, would have been much easier had the Chancellor given some additional money to fund some of the changes? Also, notwithstanding what the Secretary of State has said, will not every single school in the country face real-terms cuts in their budget, including even those that gain, or think they gain, from the changes to the funding formula? One way of tackling disadvantage is the pupil premium, so it would be interesting to hear what discussions took place about the pupil premium in making these changes. The Secretary of State said that the pupil premium “will be protected at current rates throughout the remainder of this Parliament”. Can she confirm whether that means rates as they are now or real-terms increases through the Parliament?

**Justine Greening:** We said that we will continue to put around £2.5 billion into the pupil premium, which is separate from the additional funding that will be uplifted on top of core basic funding rates, as part of the consultation that we are setting out today. Both those things underline the fact that this Government are determined to ensure that our schools funding really supports children in some of the toughest parts of the country who are most likely not to come out of the schools system with the outcomes that we want for them to be able to fulfil their potential.

**Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con):** The people of Worcestershire will welcome this statement because funding per pupil is £1,000 lower there than in neighbouring areas. Does the Secretary of State recognise that not everybody who lives in the countryside lives in some kind of rural idyll and that there are pockets of poverty and deprivation right across our countryside, including in my constituency, so investing in our children’s futures based on need and fairness is absolutely the right move?

**Justine Greening:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is why it is so important that we move to a sensible approach to how deprivation should be captured. It is also why we wanted to take a broader approach than using just those children eligible for free school meals. We did not want that cliff edge, so we will be looking at three components: existing eligibility for free school meals, children who have been eligible for free school meals over the past six years, which gives us a sense of the underlying need, and IDACI, an index that captures a broader definition of deprivation.

**Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab):** Teachers in my constituency are increasingly telling me about the funding pressures they are under. I was interested to hear the Secretary of State admit that young people in my constituency were at a disadvantage—she specifically cited the case of Halton, so I assume she knows it. What will the real-terms increase be for Halton pupils? She must know that, because she has cited Halton.

**Justine Greening:** I quoted what the current position was. The hon. Gentleman will no doubt be interested to look at the details for his local community, once we release them, when this statement to the House is finally finished.

**Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con):** Schools in York have some of the lowest, if not the lowest, per pupil funding in the country, with some schools in London receiving more than £3,000 per pupil more, leaving schools in York on the brink of making some very difficult decisions, despite delivering excellent education. What message can the Secretary of State send to schools in York that have been waiting for this announcement for far too long and want to see it implemented as soon as possible?

**Justine Greening:** I think this will be a much fairer approach for all schools, including those in York, and we are taking steps to introduce it rapidly over the remainder of this Parliament, which is good news.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. I hope that everyone who wishes to ask a question of the Secretary of State will have an opportunity, but now that she has been answering questions for over an hour, it would be appropriate if questions were short and sharp, or we will be here all day.

**Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op):** Funding should be related to need, and this is a long-standing problem. In Liverpool, which is one of the most deprived areas, over 90% of the budget has already gone, and the NUT says that over £602 per pupil will be lost under the Government’s programme. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the students of Liverpool will not lose out in this redistribution of funds?

**Justine Greening:** I encourage the hon. Lady to look at the details that will be released by area and by school. To give her some reassurance, this is a formula that absolutely wants to ensure that we direct funding fairly, but also in relation to need, whether it be disadvantage or indeed low prior attainment. We think that the formula should be driven by data that, as I have said in my answers to other hon. Members, are more up to date. I encourage the hon. Lady to look at the consultation and at the details that will be released as part of it.

**Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con):** I welcome today’s statement, and schools in Cornwall will be very grateful that, at long last, the historical underfunding of its schools is being addressed. I am pleased to be part of the party of government who are at last dealing with it. I would like to raise the particular issue of the pupil premium and eligibility to it being
based on free school meals. It is often difficult to get parents to register for free school meals, because of personal choice or the stigma they believe is attached to it, yet these data are already held by other Departments. Can we not get cross-Government co-operation so that people can be registered for free school meals automatically, rather than having to go through the process?

**Justine Greening:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. We want all children eligible for the pupil premium and free school meals to be properly registered. We have done a lot of work to try to make sure that that is the case. As my hon. Friend sets out, there is still a challenge ahead of us, and I am looking at what we can do to try to make further progress because it matters.

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I do not resent in any way the idea that Members are representing their constituents in rural areas. If particular concerns need to be taken into account, it is right to do so. The problem I have is that that should not be at the cost of urban schools, where significant levels of deprivation exist. In Oldham, the current proposals could see a loss of over £400 per pupil under the new formula; and for some schools, up to £600 per pupil could be taken away from the council’s budget. The town is already struggling to recruit and retain good-quality, high-performing teachers. We know that because it is one of the areas being looked at by the Department for special intervention. May I have an absolute commitment from the Secretary of State that we will not get into a “them versus them” argument, but that a proper review will take place to make sure that every school has sufficient funding to meet its demand and needs?

**Justine Greening** rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. Before the Secretary of State answers the question, let me say that I have allowed the hon. Gentleman some leeway because he has waited a long time to put his question. However, it does not follow that he should take twice as long to put it. I do not criticise him specifically today, but I hope that we can be a little faster now.

**Justine Greening:** I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will want to see the impact on his own local constituency, but I think this formula is a step forward to make sure that wherever children are, funding is there. As I have said on a number of occasions, it very much bakes into the formula the idea of having money follow disadvantage and need. I think that is the right approach to take.

**James Heappey** (Wells) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State and the schools Minister for listening to my concerns and those of so many of us from the south-west about school funding. I congratulate them on correcting the real unfairness in the funding that schools in the Wells constituency have had to endure for too long. Does she agree that this is the start of a series of investments in the south-west that will correct an imbalance in funding to our region, and that she has blazed a trail that other Departments will surely follow?

**Justine Greening:** That was a fantastic question. I, too, would like to take the opportunity to thank the Minister for School Standards, my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr Gibb), for the work he has done on this complex project that we have undertaken. My hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) is absolutely right that we want to see children in the south-west achieve their potential. This is a funding formula that will mean—I think, for the first time—fair funding, which I believe will help a number of a children, and perhaps some of the children in my hon. Friend’s local community.

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am delighted to speak as a Member from the county of Cambridge, which has for decades been one of the lowest funded councils in the whole country. I would like to press my right hon. Friend a little further on the interim funding, which some Members have mentioned. I do not wish to be ungrateful, but last year the interim funding was completely swallowed up with pension and national insurance increases. We are building schools like they are going out of fashion. It has to be subsidised, but the funding has to come out of the main pot, as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) said, the number of pupils is going up. There is a high cost of living and an average mortgage is 16 times the salary in South Cambridgeshire, so please, please, please will my right hon. Friend look at the interim funding again, because just the same is not going to be enough?

**Justine Greening:** We will be rolling forward, but my hon. Friend’s point underlines why it is important that we move on beyond an interim approach to put in place a final funding formula. That is what the consultation is on. As my hon. Friend says, it will affect areas that have been underfunded for a very long time. That is why we need to get on with it.

**Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): West Suffolk—

[**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): I welcome the statement. Does the Secretary of State agree that it starts to address the myth that constituencies such as Cheltenham in Gloucestershire do not have areas of deprivation? The reality is that Cheltenham has intense urban challenges. This formula is starting to address funding on the basis of need and not postcode.

**Justine Greening:** I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. Up to now, school funding has been the ultimate postcode lottery, and funding has been overly determined by where children were growing up. That is completely unacceptable. If we are to make Britain, and in this case...
schools in England, a country with schools where all children can progress, we have to get on with fair funding.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The prize for patience—this shows what happens when you sit behind the Speaker’s Chair—goes to Jason McCartney.

Jason McCartney: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and merry Christmas to you.

How far will the inclusion of a sparsity factor go in protecting the small and rural schools that are so important to my local community?

Justine Greening: I think it will help. It will go together with a fixed lump sum, which is also part of this formula. Overall and on average, small rural schools will benefit from the formula.

Points of Order

1.57 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Government plans were announced last week to close half of Glasgow’s jobcentres. We were supposed to be getting a consultation on three out of eight of these closures. I have raised the matter of access to that consultation with the Leader of the House and with the responsible Department for Work and Pensions Minister. A week later, it still does not appear on the DWP website. Given that this is happening over Christmas, I am sure you can understand my frustration and that of my constituents, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you give me some guidance on how I can make the Minister get this up on the website? It is really not on that, a week later, it is still not there for public consumption.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his having indicated to me that he intended to make it. He will appreciate that it is not, of course, a matter that I can address from the Chair. The Chair has no power whatsoever to make Ministers do what Members ask them to do. I know that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have, with some passion and understandable commitment, raised this matter several times in the House. I understand that the hon. Gentleman has an Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall next week. I hope that is right, because that is the correct place in which to air a matter such as this in some detail. At the same time, with the hon. Gentleman having raised the matter now at this busy time in the Chamber, I am quite sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have noted what he has said. They will have appreciated that the matter is one of great importance in his constituency, so action might come soon from the relevant Department.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During Prime Minister’s Question Time, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) raised the important issue of Southern’s appalling service and the present strikes that are victimising passengers. However, the hon. Lady failed to condemn the RMT and ASLEF unions and failed to declare an interest in the Chamber as a recipient of RMT funding. As a new Member, can you please advise me on the protocol for such declarations of interest in the Chamber?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his having indicated to me that he intended to make it. He will appreciate that it is not, of course, a matter that I can address from the Chair. The Chair has no power whatsoever to make Ministers do what Members ask them to do. I know that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have, with some passion and understandable commitment, raised this matter several times in the House. I understand that the hon. Gentleman has an Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall next week. I hope that is right, because that is the correct place in which to air a matter such as this in some detail. At the same time, with the hon. Gentleman having raised the matter now at this busy time in the Chamber, I am quite sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have noted what he has said. They will have appreciated that the matter is one of great importance in his constituency, so action might come soon from the relevant Department.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will understand my delight and pleasure at coming out at No. 2 in the
shuffle for International Trade questions tomorrow. My question was about whether the Department had made an assessment of the potential effect of leaving the EU customs union on levels of employment. I subsequently received an email from the Department saying that the matter had been transferred to the Department for Exiting the European Union. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) has a question on the Order Paper about the impact of leaving the customs union on levels of foreign investment into the UK, and my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) has a question about the potential effect of leaving the customs union on future trade agreements. How can we know to which Department to address our questions? I can quite understand why the Department for International Trade does not want to answer my question, which relates to a large increase in unemployment, but can we have some consistency from the Government?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I fully appreciate the hon. Lady’s point, but she knows that it is not a matter for the Chair to decide which Department should answer which question. That is, and always has been, a matter for the Government to allocate. I understand the hon. Lady’s disappointment and that she was hoping to have her question addressed on the Floor of the House tomorrow, but I will say two things. First, regardless of which Department answers her question, I am sure that she will get the same answer. Secondly, having so eloquently made her point today, I hope that Mr Speaker will look favourably upon the hon. Lady when he calls the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) tomorrow of the Secretary of State for International Trade and that the hon. Lady might well have an opportunity to ask her question. Whether she gets an answer is not a matter for me.

Financial Regulation of Funeral Services

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.4 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require pre-paid funeral plan contracts to be regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority; to amend the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulated Activities) Order 2001 accordingly; and for connected purposes.

I rise to propose this Bill as a result of “Funeral Poverty in Scotland”, a report commissioned by the Scottish Government and published in February this year. It was written by Citizens Advice Scotland and John Birrell, who chairs the Scottish working group on funeral poverty. The Scottish Government have accepted this excellent report, which has a series of recommendations, including the need to address the regulation of prepaid funeral plans. I thank Fraser Sutherland from CAS and John Birrell for their work with me on this Bill proposal. I also wish to thank the Fair Funerals Campaign, which has supported me in the run up to today.

Before I begin my speech in earnest, I should say that I am an advocate of funeral plans as the best means of avoiding funeral poverty, allowing people to pay in advance, in full or in instalments, for their own funeral. I have had meetings with the Financial Conduct Authority and the Funeral Planning Authority, the industry’s internal regulator, to discuss the proposal, and they were both constructive in their response. It was also welcome to see supportive statements this morning from the National Association of Funeral Directors and from Dignity, one of the largest funeral plan providers. We are approaching a consensus on change being required.

I am proposing this Bill in the context of a 90% rise in the cost of funerals over the last decade. In my area, North Lanarkshire Council increased burial and cremation charges by 39% last year—the steepest rise in Scotland—and the average funeral cost has risen 7% in the last year in Scotland as a result. After paying for an average funeral in the UK today, there is unlikely to be much change from £4,000. The Scottish Government are taking action in those areas and will next year publish a funeral costs plan to address the main drivers of funeral poverty. When the Scottish Government take on responsibility for the benefit, they are also committing to process applications for funeral payments within 10 working days to reduce the reliance on borrowing to pay for funerals.

The additional costs are placing an unbearable burden on the already stretched finances of bereaved families, many of whom are getting into serious and unmanageable debt when they lose a loved one, as has been raised in the House by, among others, the hon. Members for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), both of whom both support the Bill, and the hon. Members for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) and for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck). People are rightly turning to funeral plans as a way of addressing that incredible financial pressure, which often arrives suddenly on family members. Funeral plans are like vouchers for funerals that are paid in advance and redeemed when the policy holder passes away. People can sign a contract describing how they want their
funeral to take place and pay for it in advance. There is also an added advantage in that people can secure the funeral at today’s prices.

Funeral plans are described in article 59 of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulated Activities) Order 2001 and article 60 details how the plans can be exempted from FCA regulation if the funeral plan company undertakes to secure the sums paid by the customer through whole life insurance or if they hold the funds in trust—with some further stipulations about how the trust should be constituted and thereafter handled. The whole life insurance market, specifically over-50 plans, is another area that needs to be considered and is addressed by the CAS report, but it is not the focus of this particular Bill.

As I said, I spoke to the chief executive of the FPA and he understands my concerns and those raised by CAS. I also appreciate that he is not responsible for all funeral plans sold and that the FPA does all it can to satisfy complaints when they arise, but a debate is necessary on whether the current system is the best to ensure consumer confidence in what is going to be an even more important area of the market in coming years.

In compiling the report, Citizens Advice Scotland found evidence of apparent mis-selling by some funeral plan salespeople. Some funeral plans cover all associated costs for the funeral, but others cover only basic funeral director costs. It has been suggested that some salespeople are misleading customers about what is included in the contract they are signing up to. One member of a focus group quoted in the report said:

“They were very pushy and I think trying to pull the wool over my eyes. I knew the amount they were quoting wasn’t enough to cover the cost, so I think they can mislead people.”

That calls into question the practices of some salespeople involved in funeral plan contracts. Some of those are third-party salespeople who are paid on a commission basis for selling contracts, which makes me a little uncomfortable, as this can encourage people to chase harder for sales than to ensure the consumer is entirely aware of, or happy with, what they have signed up to.

Charles Flannigan, the managing director of Donald McLaren Ltd, a funeral directors based in my constituency, has told me that when he asks his customers why they have chosen to take out a plan with him the majority say it is because they are fed up with cold calling by funeral plan companies. That is of major concern to me, and I know it will be of concern to others in this House. He has also given me numerous examples of elderly people who have been coerced into buying plans that either are more expensive than necessary or are where the customer has not been asked any questions specifically about the funeral to be provided. In one case, the funeral plan company apparently waited until after the 30-day cooling-off period to deliver the funeral plan documents, and explained that the funeral director of choice had refused the funeral plan but listed others who might carry it out. The gentleman had specifically purchased the plan in order to be with that particular funeral director, who informed him that he had been mis-sold the plan as it did not include all of what he had wished for his funeral.

Mr Flannigan is particularly keen to see closer involvement of funeral directors in the selling of funeral plans, so as to avoid unintended issues in the contracts arising. Heather Kennedy from the Fair Funerals Campaign has said that there are some excellent funeral companies that are rising to the challenge presented by funeral poverty—their processes and prices are transparent, they talk openly about money and make different options available. As with any other industry, however, there are others who do not, and are charging too much for their plans and at-need funerals. I hope that some of those areas of concern may be addressed here.

Another case study was highlighted by the east of Scotland citizens advice bureau, which reported a client complaint regarding a funeral plan. The client felt that no matter what she does she is not going to get the funeral she wants or had planned for. She was told when she bought the plan that it could be at any funeral director and it would cover all the costs. It later turned out, after she had signed the contract, that the nearest funeral director who will honour the plan is 30 miles away and she will get only the “basics” from the funeral director. The director she wanted to administer the funeral will not do it, as the plan is held with another company, and the plan provider has told her she will lose a lot of her money if she cancels. She has got nowhere with the complaint.

Finally, the provision of funeral plans is not covered by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, which protects against insolvency events, nor are these plans covered by the Financial Ombudsman Service, which provides an independent complaints and adjudication service free to the consumer. Although the FPA has taken action to address these criticisms, a bonus of this Bill being accepted and enacted by the Government would be that these schemes were open to offer additional consumer confidence.

In conclusion, I hope that by my proposing this very reasonable Bill, the UK Government will look seriously at this issue and engage in a positive dialogue to ensure that consumers who are often in a vulnerable and bereaved state are adequately protected.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Neil Gray, Patricia Gibson, Roger Mullin, Dr Eilidh Whiteford, Liz Saville-Roberts, Diana Johnson, Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg, Sir David Amess, Gavin Robinson, Carolyn Harris and Rosie Cooper present the Bill.

Neil Gray accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February 2017, and to be printed (Bill 112).
Opposition Day

[16TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Equality: Autumn Statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected amendment (a) in the name of the Prime Minister.

2.15 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern the disproportionate impact of the Government’s policies on women; further notes that, as a result of proposals in the 2016 Autumn Statement, 86 per cent of net savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit changes since 2010 will come from women, according to the House of Commons Library; notes with concern analysis from the Women’s Budget Group which states that by 2020, in every income group, black and minority ethnic women will lose the greatest proportion of their individual income and that low income black and Asian women will lose around twice as much money as low income white men as a result of tax and benefit changes; and calls on the Government to affirm its commitment to ensuring that women and protected groups are not disproportionately affected by tax and benefits changes, to conduct an urgent assessment of the cumulative impact of its policies on women since 2010, to take the necessary remedial steps to mitigate any disproportionate burden of tax and benefits changes on women, to publish a full equality impact analysis with the 2017 Budget and to develop and publish a gender equality strategy to improve the position of women over the remainder of this Parliament.

It is a pleasure to be here today to discuss this important topic. The advancement of equal rights for women is often associated with certain historical milestones, such as the right to vote, the movement to end violence against women and girls, and reproductive rights. Although those are obviously hugely important, the key facet of the ongoing battle for gender equality is gender economic equality. Many women never question their right to open a bank account, own property, or even buy wine or beer in a pub, but those rights, now taken for granted, were actually hard-won. For much of history, and even up to 40 years ago, women were not allowed to handle money, and having a job was seen as a sign of financial desperation. It was only in the 19th century that women were allowed to own their own home. Until the Married Women’s Property Act 1882, common law in Britain deprived women of the right to keep their own property or even hold their own money. As late as the 1970s, working women were refused mortgages in their own right, and were only then granted mortgages if they could secure a male guarantor. It is only since 1980 that women have been able to apply for credit in their own right, and were only then granted mortgages if they could secure a male guarantor. It is only since 1980 that women have been able to apply for credit in their own name, and it was not until 1982 that women were allowed to spend their own money in pubs with the confidence that they would actually be served.

Those changes involved fearless and outspoken people challenging the status quo, questioning out-of-date assumptions, and pushing Governments and society to the realisation that economic equality and independence for women must be the norm. Today, Labour is pushing for the next step in this battle for economic equality: for the Government to ensure that their policies advance, rather than hinder, progress. Unfortunately, all the evidence points to the Conservative party turning back the clock on gender economic equality, and nowhere has that been more apparent than in their major financial announcements, such as the autumn statement.

Research from the House of Commons Library, commissioned by Labour, has revealed that as of the most recent autumn statement, 86% of net savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit changes since 2010 will have come from women. That figure is up on the one at last year’s autumn statement, which was 81%, but remains the same as the one at the Budget earlier this year. Someone who happens to be a woman from a black or minority ethnic background is set to lose out even more under this Government. Joint analysis from the Runnymede Trust and the Women’s Budget Group has shown that low-income black and Asian women are paying the highest price for this Government’s failed austerity agenda.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that when we talk about the disproportionate cuts affecting women, what that so often means in practice is their children going without? That is why we have seen a huge spike in child poverty, reversing all the good work that the last Labour Government did.

Sarah Champion: My hon. Friend, who has long been a campaigner in this area, is absolutely right about that. I do not understand why people do not consider the economic impact on the entire country if we hold back certain sectors of our population.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does the hon. Lady accept that more women who have children are in work in this country than in the rest of Europe?

Sarah Champion: That is a wonderful thing, and what we want is for them to reach their full economic potential, rather than, as happens at the moment, getting paid less than they ought.

The analysis shows that by 2020, individuals in the poorest households will lose most from tax and benefit changes, but in every income group, BME women will lose the greatest proportion of their individual income. Low-income black and Asian women will lose around twice as much money as low-income white men as a result of tax and benefit changes. The Women’s Budget Group has also highlighted analysis showing that disabled people are losing significantly more as a result of those changes than non-disabled people, and disabled women are losing more than disabled men. According to its analysis, disabled men are losing nine times as much income as non-disabled women. Disabled women are losing twice as much income as non-disabled women. By 2020, families with both disabled adults and disabled children will lose more than £5,000 a year as a result of tax and benefit changes, as well as services to the value of nearly £9,000 a year as a result of Government cuts to services. Do Ministers believe that that figure is acceptable and in line with assertions from the Prime Minister and the Chancellor that their party is the champion of equality and fairness? We know that Budgets and policy decisions are simply not gender-neutral.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Does the hon. Lady recognise that she seems to be suggesting having no plan and no sustainability? Does she accept that
welfare spending tripled in real terms between 1980-81 and 2014-15? We believe that that is unsustainable and does not balance the books.

**Sarah Champion:** I think I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Does she recognise that there are groups in our society now that are being made poorer by this Government? That is the position that we are in, and that is what the statistics are telling us.

It has been proved that this Government frequently do not recognise gender differentials, and that assumptions are made in policy making that include biases in favour of existing unequal gender relations. Women are particularly vulnerable to being hit harder by Government policies, for a number of reasons. First, social security payments make up a greater share of women’s income than men’s, as women earn less in the labour market. Secondly, women pay less direct tax than men, because they tend to earn less. Women make greater use of public sector care services than men, because they have greater caring responsibilities. Finally, women are hit harder by Government policies, because a higher proportion of women are employed in the public sector. I ask the Minister how those factors were taken into account in the drafting of the most recent autumn statement?

Labour has already committed to a gender audit of financial statements when in government, the aim of which is to make gender equality a significant element in considering and recommending policy options. That would ensure that proposed measures contained no legal, economic, social or cultural constraints to gender-equitable participation and that policies were implemented in a gender-sensitive and equitable manner.

That process, which is often referred to as gender auditing or gender budgeting, now takes place in more than 40 countries around the world. It was originally inspired by the early experiences of countries such as Australia and then given further momentum by the United Nations commitment to gender budgeting in the Beijing platform for action.

I wish to draw the House’s attention to two particular examples of best practice, in Sweden and Spain. Gender impact assessment is a relatively common instrument to support the gender mainstreaming of policy implementation in Sweden. It is strongly embedded and is carried out by different levels of government, from local to national. In national Government offices, gender impact assessments are most regularly performed when drawing up documents such as Government Bills and terms of reference for inquiry committees. The implementation of those assessments is conducted in the framework of the Swedish Government’s gender mainstreaming strategy.

In Spain, gender impact assessments have been required by law in the Basque country since 2005, in the framework of the Equal Opportunities between Women and Men Act. Since 2007, gender impact assessment reports have been issued on more than 500 decrees and laws. After seven years, gender impact assessment is a consolidated practice that is strongly embedded in the Basque regional government.

Those are just two examples to demonstrate that, when it comes to mainstreaming equalities into economic and wider policy, the Conservative party is light years behind some of our European colleagues.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): What gender impact assessment has the hon. Lady made of the effects of the 2008 credit crunch, and the record deficit that we inherited? Does she not recognise that decisions that we had to take were based on restoring the nation’s finances, which is in the interests of everyone, not just a narrow interest group?

**Sarah Champion:** I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but why do women need to bear the brunt of this Government’s austerity?

**James Cartlidge rose—**

**Sarah Champion:** I am sorry, but I am not having a conversation.

Will the Minister agree today to follow the example set by many other nations and produce recommendations on how equalities considerations can be better integrated into the policy process?

**Lucy Frazer:** The hon. Lady mentioned that Spain carries out gender impact assessments. What does she think of the fact that, according to the global gender gap index of 2016, Britain ranks higher than Spain on inequality between men and women?

**Sarah Champion:** I ask the hon. and learned Lady to think how much better we would do if we actively audited what we were doing.

Legal and international obligations on the Government mean that they need to protect and advance women’s economic equality. The Equality Act 2010, which was introduced by Labour, enshrined in law the public sector equality duty, requiring public authorities to have due regard to a number of equality considerations when exercising their functions. Labour enshrined in section 149 of that Act the provision that any public body must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to “eliminate discrimination” and “advance equality of opportunity” for those with protected characteristics, which include gender and ethnicity.

The case of Bracking and others v. the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is one of the leading cases on the application of section 149 of the Equality Act. The principles outlined in the judgment were recently summarised by Mr Justice Gilbart in Moore and another v. the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and crucially include the following: that the relevant duty is on the Minister, or other decision maker, personally; that a Minister must assess the risk and extent of any adverse impact and the ways in which such risk may be eliminated before the adoption of a proposed policy, and not simply as a “rearguard action” following a concluded decision; and that the duty of due regard under the statute requires public authorities to be properly informed before taking a decision. If the relevant material is not available, there will be a duty to acquire it, and that will frequently mean that some further consideration with appropriate groups is required.

Specifically, I ask the Minister to outline how the most recent autumn statement, as well as policy announcements since her party came to Government, comply with section 149 of the Equality Act and the requirements outlined by Mr Justice Gilbart. Assumptions and reassurances will not suffice, and the public demand
[Sarah Champion]
to see how the autumn statement and Government policies comply with relevant sections of the Equality Act and with case law. I ask the Minister to kindly make that information available through the House of Commons Library at the earliest possible opportunity.

We should not have to hold the Government's feet to the fire to ensure that their policies are not disproportionately impacting one particular group and reversing progress on economic equality. Sadly, previous words from the Conservative party do not fill us with much hope. On 19 November 2012, the then Prime Minister spoke at the Confederation of British Industry's annual conference. He announced that Government Departments would no longer be required to carry out equality impact assessments. He referred to equality impact assessments as "reams of bureaucratic nonsense" and "tick-box stuff". Do the current Prime Minister and Chancellor agree with that analysis?

Suella Fernandez: The hon. Lady talks about progress, but what does she think about the fact that the gender pay gap has narrowed to a record level, and has been virtually eliminated for women under the age of 40? We have more women-led businesses than ever before. Should she not acknowledge that progress?

Sarah Champion: I have to say that it pains me that it is a woman Member who is asking that. Should I go back to my constituents and ask them to be grateful that it will only take another 60 years before they have parity of pay?

If the Government are set to continue their contemptuous attitude on equality impact assessments, will the Minister explain how else they have managed to show that due regard has been given to the impact of the autumn statement on those with protected characteristics?

The Government know how to conduct a proper audit of their policies on women and those with protected characteristics. The Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Women's Budget Group, among many others, have outlined suggested methodologies very clearly. We have to ask why, in the light of the availability of those methodologies, the Government continue to be so evasive. Labour Members will not go of this point. We will continue to commission and publish our own analysis at every future Budget and spring statement for as long as it takes the Government to do their duty. The question is how long the Government will continue to stick their head in the sand regarding the impact of their policies on women, disabled people and people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Will things change when the impact figure rises from 86% to 89%? Perhaps it will be 95%, or perhaps we have to reach 100% before the Government carry out an audit.

The situation has become increasingly embarrassing, as the Government continue to let women down time and time again. The Treasury refuses to send a Minister to appear before the Women and Equalities Committee to answer questions on the gender impact of the autumn statement. The Government have provided insubstantial data, and last year they voted down an Opposition motion on publishing a cumulative gender impact assessment of their policies. In their amendment to today's motion, the Government point to their distributional analysis, which provides no overall analysis of the impact of the measures announced in the autumn statement on women, black and minority ethnic people or disabled people.

A few days before the autumn statement, the Women and Equalities Committee published a report criticising the Government for their lack of clarity both on how the 2015 spending review affected women, black and minority ethnic people and disabled people, and on how the equalities impact assessment had been undertaken. The Chair of the Committee, the highly regarded Conservative MP, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), said:

"Without the information we have asked for or ministerial evidence it's not been possible to form a view of the Government's work under the public sector equality duty. Promotion of transparency is a central aim of the Public Sector Equality Duty requirements."

The Committee, numerous organisations and, indeed, the Opposition have all made it clear that the distributional analysis produced by the Government is inadequate for judging compliance with the Equality Acts. The evasiveness must stop. Women and those with protected characteristics up down the country deserve and expect better. Various Ministers have refused to accept the analysis produced by the House of Commons Library that is cited in the motion. If the Minister disagrees with independent House of Commons analysis, will he say whether the Government would be willing to produce their own and make it available to colleagues? It is simply not good enough for the Government to criticise the Library analysis without producing their own.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Will the hon. Lady explain whether the House of Commons analysis includes the national living wage? Two thirds of women benefit from the national living wage policy.

Sarah Champion: The problem with the national living wage is that it is a misnomer. It is welcome that it has been increased, but we are seeking a real living wage that brings people out of poverty, and we have not seen that.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend accept that if someone represents a party whose sole interest is to conserve the wealth of people who already have it, it is absolutely inevitable that people who are unfortunately still at the bottom of the pile will remain there as long as that party remains in government?

Sarah Champion: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I am proud that I represent a party that wants wealth to be shared, wants everyone to reach their potential, and will not leave anyone behind.

As I have stated, the Government know how to conduct an adequate equalities audit of their financial statements and policies. Clear methodologies have been produced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and they have chosen not to use them. Will the Minister agree to explain to the House how future announcements can properly take into account the impact on women, particularly those from BME backgrounds? Will the Government agree to put an end to the ducking and diving and send a Minister to the Women and Equalities Committee to answer questions on the matter? Will they
agree to publish a full cumulative gender impact analysis of their policies since 2010, and will they outline how the autumn statement, and future financial and policy announcements, will demonstrate compliance with the UK’s legal and international obligations?

As I outlined in my opening remarks, gender economic equality has been at the heart of the fight for equal rights in this country. Progress has been all too slow and the victories hard-won. The Opposition can be proud that almost every major piece of legislation that improves the lives of working women has been introduced by a Labour Government. It was a Labour Government who introduced legislative protections for women under the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Equality Act 2010. The Labour Administration were the first since the second world war to accept state responsibility for developing childcare policy, and they introduced paternity leave and increased maternity leave. We brought in Sure Start centres, working tax credits and all-women shortlists, and we have more women MPs than all the other parties in the House combined.

In 2016, under the current Government, women in the UK are more likely to work for less pay than men. They are more likely to be in chronically low-paid and insecure sectors of the economy and to be disproportionately affected by unprecedented cuts to public services.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sarah Champion: I shall not give way, because other Members wish to contribute.

Unlawful maternity discrimination has become increasingly pervasive on the Government’s watch, with an estimated 54,000 pregnant women and new mothers forced out of their job every year. According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, just 1% of those women have taken their case to an employment tribunal since the introduction of prohibitive tribunal fees of up to £1,200. As I stated at the beginning of my speech, as of the most recent autumn statement, 86% of net savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit changes since 2010 have come from women. Today, the Government have a chance to decide whether they want to be their lasting legacy in the fight for gender economic equality. Ministers have a choice: do the Government stand by, evade their responsibilities and make life worse for millions of women in this country, or do they put their warm words into action, rectify their mistakes and create a new era of transparency and accountability on the impact of Government policy on women, disabled people, and black and ethnic minority people? We expect them to make the right choice.

2.36 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to the end of the Question and add:

“affirms that introducing tax-free childcare, increasing the national living wage, increasing investment in affordable housing, reducing the universal credit taper, boosting investment in schools to create more good school places and taking 1.3 million individuals out of paying income tax so far this Parliament will benefit all genders and races; welcomes the fact that there are more women in work than ever before; further welcomes the Government’s publication of distributional analysis along with the Autumn Statement 2016; and welcomes the action the Government is taking to develop a strong economy that works for everyone, regardless of their background.”

It is a great pleasure to move an amendment in the name of a female Prime Minister. It is the Government’s foremost aim to make sure that this is a country that works for everyone in our society, wherever they are from, and whatever their gender, race, age or background. To deliver that objective, we need to build a strong and stable economy by boosting productivity, creating jobs, and bringing our public finances under control. That is how we will be in the best position to create a sustained rise in living standards for all British people. Our entire economic approach is based on a determination to make people better off now and in future, in all parts of the UK, and across the full breadth of our society. That is why we reject the assumptions in the motion and believe instead that the plans that we have set out will deliver a stronger economy that works for everyone.

I want to reflect on the measures that we have taken to strengthen our economy in this way, because people, regardless of their race or gender will benefit from our work to restore the economy to long-term health, which begins with bringing our public finances under control. With UK debt soon reaching a 50-year high of 90.2% of GDP, we must pursue a credible fiscal path to make it fall. Over the past six years, we have cut the deficit by almost two thirds to 4% of GDP, and we confirmed in the recent autumn statement that we will deliver a surplus as soon as possible in the next Parliament, while in the interim bringing cyclically adjusted borrowing below 2% by the end of Parliament, and getting public sector net debt, as a share of GDP, falling in this Parliament too.

People across our society benefit from the business-led recovery that has been at the heart of our economic approach. We have made sure that Britain is open for business with our competitive tax regime, by cutting over £10 billion-worth of red tape, and with our extensive investment in infrastructure, skills and research. The autumn statement took that further with a whole host of measures, including the new national productivity investment fund of £23 billion over the next five years. It is as a result of such measures that over 1 million new businesses have started since 2010, taking us up to a record 5.5 million small businesses at the beginning of the year. By the way, I am pleased to say that about 1.2 million small and medium-sized enterprises in the UK are majority women-led—more than ever before—and they contribute about £115 billion to the economy in total.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): With regard to the infrastructure spending, which the Minister heralds as part of the recovery, how many of the jobs that will be created by that will go to women?

Mr Gauke: I cannot say how many will go to women or men. Is the hon. Lady objecting to the infrastructure spending because she believes that it will not go to women? I will happily give way to her again.

Jess Phillips: I will make a more substantive speech about that shortly, but currently in the construction industry 1% of jobs go to women—1%. I ask the Minister again: what percentage of the jobs created by infrastructure spending does he think will go to women?
Mr Gauke: There are now more women doing science, technology, engineering and maths A-level subjects than ever before, which will ensure that more of them go into such jobs. I am trying to understand the hon. Lady’s point. Is she saying that we should not be spending money on infrastructure because that will have a disproportionate effect, favouring men? The purpose of infrastructure spending is to improve our infrastructure in order to improve our productivity—productivity that helps men and women. That is why we are doing that.

Jess Phillips: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this Government are helping women at work by introducing shared parental leave, flexible working hours and 30 hours of free childcare? Those have been pioneered by this Government, putting women first in the workplace.

Mr Gauke: Indeed. My hon. Friend makes an important point. I will deal with those measures in a moment.

It is worth pointing out that the impressive employment numbers are accompanied by rising living standards, which last year grew at their fastest rate in 14 years and currently stand at their highest-ever level. The benefits of this affect people across our society, but the House should note the evidence of particular benefits for women and people from black and minority ethnic groups. The number of women in work has increased by over 1.2 million since 2010. Indeed, the rate went up more in the previous Parliament than in the previous three Parliaments combined. That comes as the gender pay gap falls to the lowest on record, more women are on the boards or leading businesses than ever before, and there are no longer any all-male boards in the FTSE 100.

James Cartlidge: On the subject of pay, I refer to the excellent intervention my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (Monmouth) (Con). My right hon. Friend spoke for the Opposition and said that the national living wage was not adequate. Is my right hon. Friend aware that the only international comparator for minimum wage is The Economist Big Mac index, which shows that the only country with a more generous living wage than this country is Luxembourg?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I did not know that and I am grateful to him for drawing it to the attention of the House. The national living wage, which was brought in by this Government, disproportionately benefits women.

The number of black and minority ethnic women in work is at a near record high, with nearly 400,000 women finding work since 2010, and the employment rate for people in black and minority ethnic groups is at a record high of 64.5%, its highest level since records began in 2001.

Sarah Champion: I am grateful to the Minister for outlining what companies are doing to help women and the black, Asian and ethnic minorities. That is fabulous, but the debate is about what this Government are doing and how the Government’s austerity is adversely affecting those groups.

Mr Gauke: The logic of the hon. Lady’s point appears to be that there is no link between what happens in the economy and Government policies. That has been demonstrated over the past 10 years is that there is a very clear link between Government policies and what happens in the economy, and it is because of the policies of this—[Interruption.] We are the fastest-growing economy in the G7 at present, so it is going quite well, given that, among the major economies, we were the economy that was most affected by the crash in 2008. We have put in place an environment where we are creating jobs and seeing living standards improving, and that is happening across the economy for men and women.
It is, of course, right that we continue our work to address long-standing barriers to work for BME people, including through Baroness McGregor-Smith’s review, new support in schools, and new guidance for jobcentres and local partners. We have also set a public target to increase the proportion of apprenticeships started by people from BME backgrounds to 20% by 2020, building on good progress since 2010.

So we are strengthening our economy by managing stable public finances, backing our businesses and creating jobs. At the same time, we are helping people regardless of gender or race make their money go further in their day-to-day lives. That is why we confirmed in the autumn statement that we will raise the personal allowance to £12,500 by the end of the Parliament. By 2020, it will have increased by over 90% since 2010, taking millions of the lowest paid out of paying income tax, and representing a tax cut for over 13 million women by 2018, compared to 2015.

We have also introduced the national living wage at £7.20 an hour to help over a million people on the lowest wages, and we announced at the autumn statement that we would raise this to £7.50 in 2017. The national living wage is focused on hard-working, low-paid workers, regardless of their gender or race, and hon. Members should note that women are expected to account for two thirds of those who will benefit from this, with people from BME communities expected to gain disproportionately.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I understand what the Minister is saying about the national living wage and the increase in the floor, but on the 40% tax rate, only 27% of higher rate taxpayers are women, so the changes to the 40% tax rate disproportionately benefit men, not women. What are the Government doing about that?

**Mr Gauke:** Income tax in Scotland will be a matter for the Scottish Government. I look forward to seeing what they will do.

From early 2017, we are also introducing tax-free childcare to help working parents with their childcare costs. Parents will be able to receive up to £2,000 childcare support per child each year. We are also helping around 3 million households by reducing the universal credit taper, which will further strengthen the incentives for people to increase the number of hours they work and to earn their way out of financial insecurity and welfare dependency.

That goes hand in hand with our sustained investment in the public services that families value. That includes our focus on quality schools, with the highest-ever recorded proportion of children being taught in good or outstanding schools; the pupil premium, which will be worth £2.5 billion this year alone and will support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds; and an investment of £23 billion in the school estate over the next five years.

Our investment in infrastructure—from the roads and rails we travel on, to the homes we live in—will help all. The recent autumn statement contributed to tackling our long-standing challenge to deliver more homes, with a further £5.3 billion investment in housing, including a £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund to deliver infrastructure to unlock up to 100,000 new homes, and £1.4 billion to deliver 40,000 new affordable homes.

So our economic plans are based on delivering an economy that works for everyone, and that means an economy that benefits all races and genders. I note the efforts to analyse the impact of the measures we have taken on women and BME groups. Hon. Members will be aware of the research of the House of Commons Library and the Women’s Budget Group, on which the premise of today’s motion is based, but a cautious approach should be taken when analysing specific impacts on that basis. Their findings should not be considered without first undertaking an honest reflection on the flaws inherent in their research methodologies. Let me provide a few examples.

First, the House of Commons Library analysis looks only at taxes and benefits. That means it overlooks key parts of the broader economic picture, which includes the benefits to women and people from BME groups of a strong economy and rising employment and earnings. It also fails to take into account the public services that families value, such as support for childcare, schools and health services.

Secondly, the analysis has been based on assumptions made about how income is shared in any given household. For example, it is not reasonable to assume that the measure to limit support as part of child tax credits and universal credit to the first two children for new claimants will overwhelmingly affect women merely because women are usually the nominal payee of child tax credits, as the House of Commons Library did in previous analysis. This not only treats women rather than children as the beneficiary of child tax credits, but assumes that other sources of income, such as earnings, are not shared within a household in response to benefit changes.

Thirdly, the analysis makes a comparison with a world where benefits were uprated between 2010 and 2015 by the retail prices index, but RPI is a flawed measure of inflation, and it lost its status as a national statistic in 2013. So there are a range of issues with the methods used to calculate these impacts, and the findings should be seen in that light.

It is, however, right that we assess carefully the effects of any new fiscal measures on groups across our society. We carefully consider the implications of all our measures for protected equality groups, which includes gender, race and disability. That is in line with not only our own guiding principle of a fairer society but our legal responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. We publish information alongside the autumn statement about the impact of individual tax measures. We also publish a comprehensive distributional analysis to monitor how our decisions on tax, welfare and spending would support households on a range of different incomes.

Our commitment to fairness runs through everything we do. It goes to the heart of the economic approach we have taken since 2010. The Prime Minister could not have been clearer about her determination to keep taking every action to make this a country that works for everyone. That is why, for example, we have launched an audit to look into racial disparities in our public services, which stretches right across Government, covering every area from health to education, and childcare to welfare, employment, skills and justice.

This Government are fully resolved to make this a country that works for all races and genders. That is exactly what we are working to deliver through our
work to build a stronger economy and to help people in their day-to-day lives, and that is what last month’s autumn statement continued to support.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the spokesman for the Scottish National party, I should warn the House that a great many people want to speak this afternoon. There were lots of interventions on the opening speeches—quite rightly so, because that is how you have a heated debate, and that is what this is. I make no criticism whatsoever, but that does mean there will have to be a time limit of three minutes on Back-Bench speeches. That does not, of course, apply to Alison Thewliss.

2.55 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate, particularly as recent figures indicated that there have been 455 female MPs in the history of this House. That is the same as the number of male MPs present in the House today—although not on the Benches, as we can see. That is an important point in terms of the policies the House pursues, because those policies are not always in the interests of women, and women’s interests have not been well represented over the years. We did not always have the 195 women we have today, although those women we have here today have certainly made their voices and those of their constituents heard.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who spoke very passionately and with great knowledge on this issue, and I absolutely support her calls for a gender audit because that would make a massive difference to the way Government policies are analysed.

Research from the Women’s Budget Group, which has been mentioned, noted that women’s incomes will be hit twice as hard as men’s by 2020. Women will be over £1,000 worse off by 2020; for men, that figure will be only £555. Women on below-average incomes will end up over £1,600 a year worse off under this Government, and female lone parents will be £4,000 a year worse off. That is a significant amount in a family budget.

Engender has suggested that, from 2010 to 2020, 86% of cuts to social security will come from women’s incomes. I do not understand how anyone could make up that difference. The research becomes even bleaker when we consider women from black and ethnic minority communities, as well as single parents, the majority of whom are women, and both groups are a significant demographic in my diverse constituency.

Government Members love their soundbites. For quite a long time, they had “a long-term economic plan”, but that has been abandoned, presumably because it was neither long term nor a plan. They now have a new phrase: “a country that works for everyone”. The facts and figures we have heard in the debate so far demonstrate quite clearly that this was not an autumn statement that works for everyone, and I intend to highlight a few missed opportunities in the autumn statement.

I come to the debate with some frustration. The autumn statement was an opportunity for the Government to make changes—to start a slightly new course with a new female Prime Minister. To use an example I have spoken about many times in the House, it is now 526 days since the Government announced in the 2015 Budget their intention to bring forward the pernicious two-child policy for universal credit and tax credits, which is due to come into force next April. In tandem with that, we have the medieval rape clause, which will compel survivors of rape to prove that their third or subsequent child was born as a result of rape. The policy has been widely condemned by faith leaders, women’s welfare groups, rape crisis organisations and organisations such as the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. Ministers would do well to reflect on the seriousness of that widespread condemnation.

Interlink, from the Orthodox Jewish community, has done some research into the issue, as has the Resolution Foundation. Their figures suggest that this policy will push 200,000 more children into poverty. That is a significant figure. There is also a trap inherent in the policy, and families will not be able to earn enough to get themselves out of that trap. Interlink reckons that for every £1 extra a family earns, they will lose 75p as a result of this policy. On taking office, the Prime Minister spoke outside Downing Street about helping the just managing families in our society. This autumn statement does not provide that help.

When the Prime Minister was Home Secretary, she won plaudits for her action to tackle gender issues, such as forced marriage, domestic abuse and female genital mutilation. Her actions gave me some hope that this rape clause would be seen as utterly unworkable and immoral. When the consultation reports back, perhaps the issue will be tackled finally. I cannot see how this proposal can possibly work.

Instead of using the autumn statement as a means to ditch the rape clause and the two-child policy, the Government have put it out to consultation for 38 days. In the context of the more than 500 days since the policy was announced, that is a pretty small number. I await the Government’s response, but I do wonder what they expect the consultation to come back with. What do they expect vulnerable women to say when they are asked, in essence, “How would you like to prove your child was born as a result of rape?” It is absolutely despicable.

In this respect, as in so many others, the autumn statement was a missed opportunity. The Government’s austerity agenda is disproportionately impacting on women. It was a missed opportunity for WASPI—the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—and the Office for National Statistics estimates that over 2,600,000 women in the UK are affected by this policy. Despite the efforts of WASPI campaigners the length and breadth of the country and of my hon. Friends the Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), these issues are not yet addressed. Those women are not having that unjustness dealt with. That hugely significant unfairness, of which my mother-in-law is also a victim, ought to be one of the Prime Minister’s actions, both as a woman in that age bracket herself and as a feminist. Women should not lose out as a result of this policy.
The Government could also have done more in the autumn statement to address an issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) has been highlighting over the past few weeks. Sadly, she is not well today; otherwise she would be here herself to raise it. I am sure we all send her our best wishes on her sickbed. The Child Maintenance Service is charging a 4% administration fee for the collect and pay service—a fee imposed only on families who do not share bank details to arrange maintenance costs—and women who have fled domestic abuse are disproportionately impacted. That is patently unfair, and it puts women and children who are trying to rebuild their family life at a distinct disadvantage. The autumn statement was an opportunity to correct that unfairness. I call on Ministers to make progress on this very significant matter.

Half of Glasgow’s jobcentres are to close. In discussion with DWP staff last week, Glasgow’s elected representatives were told that the equalities impact assessment on these plans would be done only after the consultation. The Government are proceeding with these closures, yet only three out of eight are going to consultation while the others will not be consulted on. This is completely inadequate. The plans were drawn up by looking at Google Maps to see how far one jobcentre was from another and which buses people might get. Some of the buses referred to do not exist any more because they have just been withdrawn. When I met representatives of One Parent Families Scotland, they told me that the women with caring responsibilities they have been working with are already finding it incredibly difficult to fulfil their obligations as well as dropping off their kids at school and nursery, and adding the extra burden of travelling across Glasgow on more than one bus will make it very much harder, as well as putting them at serious risk of being sanctioned. It is inexplicable that that would not be taken into account prior to these consultations being issued. It is almost as though the Government are deliberately making it so hard for people to claim what they are actually entitled to.

Another group who have missed out are the under-25s. The Government are keen to trumpet their “pretendy” living wage, but what they never say is that someone under 25 is not entitled to the same pay. Their day’s work is not seen as being of much value as if they were over 25. The Government sometimes say that that would not be taken into account prior to these plans being done only after the consultation. The equality impact assessment on these plans would be done only after the consultation. The Government are proceeding with these closures, yet only three out of eight are going to consultation while the others will not be consulted on. This is completely inadequate. The plans were drawn up by looking at Google Maps to see how far one jobcentre was from another and which buses people might get. Some of the buses referred to do not exist any more because they have just been withdrawn. When I met representatives of One Parent Families Scotland, they told me that the women with caring responsibilities they have been working with are already finding it incredibly difficult to fulfil their obligations as well as dropping off their kids at school and nursery, and adding the extra burden of travelling across Glasgow on more than one bus will make it very much harder, as well as putting them at serious risk of being sanctioned. It is inexplicable that that would not be taken into account prior to these consultations being issued. It is almost as though the Government are deliberately making it so hard for people to claim what they are actually entitled to.

The real living wage set by the Living Wage Foundation is being actively implemented and promoted by the Scottish Government. In Scotland, the rates of companies paying the living wage are going up. We now have 693 companies in Scotland, across a wide range of sectors and a wide range of sizes, that believe that a fair day’s work deserves a fair day’s pay. The Government’s “pretendy” living wage will not deliver that. In discriminating against under-25s, the Government do not acknowledge that they have bills to pay. They are not going to get a discount on their rents, their messages or their costs of living. They are also, to compound this, not entitled to the same benefits as those who are over 25. It is completely ludicrous.

There is another issue that the autumn statement has not fully addressed—the tampon tax. The SNP was the only party to have that issue in its manifesto in 2015. As the Minister may remember—he was then the Financial Secretary—when I moved my amendment to the Finance Bill, he seemed to think that resolving this would be nigh on impossible to achieve, but I am pleased that he has been able to make progress. I thank the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), my hon. Friends and others around the House who have campaigned on this issue. Without that cross-party support, we would not have got nearly as far as we have with the Government.

Although the recent funding announcement in the autumn statement regarding the revenues from the tampon tax were welcome, I would like to press the Minister to answer a couple of questions. How many groups in Scotland have benefited from tampon tax funds? When, for certain, will negotiations lead to the abolition of the tampon tax? We are still waiting. Every month, when I go to buy more tampons at the tills, the Government are still seeing that revenue come in. I want to know when I am not going to have to pay it any longer.

I agree with groups such as the Women’s Budget Group and Engender that this autumn statement was a missed opportunity. It was a missed opportunity on the rape clause and the two-child policy. It was a missed opportunity on pay equality. It was a missed opportunity for the WASPI women. It was a missed opportunity for all women.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I now have to announce the result of today’s deferred Division. In respect of the Question relating to financial services and markets, the Ayes were 297 and the Noes were 151, so the Question was agreed.

[The Division list is published at the end of today’s debates.]

We will now proceed, to begin with, with a time limit on speeches of four minutes, but that might well go down to three minutes very soon.

3.6 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Ever since the Tory party, which had stood for the old landed interests, was taken over at some time in the 1800s by a motley mixture of free traders, Unionists and small “i” liberals, the Conservative party has been absolutely committed to the principle of equality of opportunity in a society where anyone can succeed based on their merit, with no regard for their race, sexual orientation or gender. That principle is absolutely right and one that we maintain to this day. As a father of two daughters myself, I want them to be able to succeed in education, in the workplace and in the public space. I am delighted with the progress that this Government are making so far, and that our society is making so far, with, as has been pointed out, the lowest gender pay gap on record, record numbers of women in employment, the fall in unemployment announced today bringing it well below 5%—something that men and women can all benefit from—and increases in the minimum wage.
Yes, of course, we have more to do, but the autumn statement was not an opportunity to start spending money from the unlimited magical money tree that Opposition Members imagine: it was an opportunity to maintain the sound financial direction in which we have been going, which has led even _The Guardian_ to admit that we now have the highest growth rates in the whole of the G7. It would be disastrous for everyone in this country—men and women—if the Government were to go back on that.

Of course, there are problems out there, and the Casey report, which came out a week or two ago, highlighted some of the many problems that we still face in the challenge of getting complete equality in our society. I am glad that the motion mentions the particular problems faced by black and ethnic minority women, which were also referred to in the Casey review. The most worrying statistic was that the biggest problems are faced by women of Bangladeshi cultural heritage. The report pointed out that cultural and religious factors and attitudes are having an effect. People have popped up to say that that was a disgrace and that we should not be worried about drawing attention to this for fear of being called racist. Well, I am sorry, but some of us have been pointing it out in this Chamber for very many years. I served on the Home Affairs Committee in 2008 when it produced a report on forced marriage, female genital mutilation and so-called honour crimes.

That report was absolutely horrifying. We heard evidence of girls who had been forced to marry rapists and who were unable to prevent British authorities from giving visas to the rapists because they were unable to speak out in public for fear of what would happen to them at the hands of their own families. We heard about female genital mutilation. We heard that schools are refusing to put up the number of the forced marriage helpline—in this country—because of concerns that it would alienate the local community. We know that political meetings are taking place addressed by senior Labour Members where men and women are segregated. I pointed out a few weeks ago in this Chamber that the Muslim Council of Britain—one of the so-called moderate Muslim groups—was linking to a website that told women that they should not be able to travel more than 48 miles without a male chaperone. I have drawn attention in this Chamber to the fact that some girls in some schools are expected to wear the full burqa as part of their uniform. I recently met members of One Law for All, who I am glad to say are currently giving evidence to the Home Affairs Committee on the issue of sharia law. They are worried about the increased wearing of the burqa and the pressure that girls are under to wear it in some parts of London at the moment.

I very much hope people will understand that it is not the autumn statement that is causing a lot of these problems, but backward cultural attitudes displayed by men in some communities towards the women in those communities. I am very glad that the Government announced in the autumn statement that the £3 million tampon tax would be used to support women's charities. I urge them to put the money towards charities like Karma Nirvana, run by Jasvinder Sanghera, who campaigns against forced marriage; One Law for All, which is campaigning against sharia law; and all the other charities that are reaching out to women in ethnic minority communities to bring about the equality we all so badly want.

3.10 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I am speaking in this debate because this Government’s so-called long-term economic plan has failed, is failing and continues to fail women in particular. The motion states that “86 per cent of net savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit” measures will come from women. The Minister said that maybe that was not the full picture. Well, it is not the full picture because it does not take into account the many hours of unpaid caring work that women in our communities do, often plugging the gap left by cuts to local services—caused by this Government. Moreover, some women are paying far more than others, and women in low-paid jobs from the black and minority ethnic community and women with disabilities are disproportionately taking the hit from this Government.

When it comes to social care that is paid care, rather than unpaid care, we know that 82% of employees in adult social care are women, and that their hourly median wage is £7.10, but that often does not take into account travel time between appointments, so the true figure can drop as low as £5.75—well below the £6.70 national minimum wage. The autumn statement said nothing on social care, health, the NHS or mental health; as a result it missed the point and did not tackle the issues that we face as a country.

There was nothing in the autumn statement for the 2.6 million women who have had their lives changed by this Government’s attitude to the equalisation of pension ages. Those WASPI women have campaigned with dignity, but they got nothing from this autumn statement, as the Government continue to refuse to act for them.

On the tampon tax, can the Minister confirm whether the £3 million announced in the autumn statement is new funding or the remainder of the allocation from 2015 funds? I do not know where to begin with the tampon tax. The injustice of women having to pay that tax is not negated by the fact that money is given to women’s charities, because women should not be funding our own refuges. A tax that the Government hope to abolish—we stand with them on that; we would like to abolish it too—does not offer secure funding for our refuges, which need long-term secure funding. The Government need to step up to the mark on that.

This debate should not be taking place, because the Government should have published their equality impact analysis ahead of the autumn statement. Perhaps the Minister will let us know whether she plans to publish the impact analysis that was undertaken ahead of the 2016 autumn statement, to reveal its impact on women.

Nothing in this debate is new. It has been known for decades that cuts to public services have a disproportionate impact on women, because they are more likely to work in the public sector and to be using the services provided by the public sector, and yet it is women who often pick up the unpaid work that is left to be done when services are cut. We have known for decades that women are disproportionately represented among the lowest-paid in our communities, and are therefore now being disproportionately impacted by the cuts made by this
Government. Given that this fundamental analysis is well known and widely accepted, one can only assume that this Government deliberately presented an autumn statement that they knew would disproportionately impact on women.

The Labour party has made a commitment that any future Labour Government will ensure that all economic policies are gender-audited, to ensure that they truly work for all. Not only has austerity failed our country, and especially the women of our country, but we need to remember that this was a political choice, made for ideological reasons rather than economic necessity.

3.14 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): The Opposition motion is an attempt to attack the Government’s record on equality in relation to gender and race. I am saddened by it—saddened but unsurprised, because it is unoriginal, it is typical and it is an unfounded attack.

I would ask the Opposition to change the record. They need to dump their 1980s retro-socialism and face the facts. The Conservative party that I have been elected to represent, as a woman and as a member of an ethnic minority, bears no resemblance to the picture they are trying to paint in the motion, in philosophy or policy—in fact, quite the contrary.

I am proud that on this side of the House, our values of fairness, meritocracy and service inform our policies—our values of aspiration. We say it does not matter where you start in life. It does not matter what your parents did. It does not matter where you come from. You can rise up, by using the ladder that the Conservatives provide—not handouts and not dependency. The key to that is working, because that produces confidence. It engenders teamwork. It creates responsibility. We believe that taxation stifles enterprise, instead of empowering. That is what this autumn statement depicts, and that is what this Government’s track record reflects.

Labour’s default position of increasing taxation, of spending more, is unsustainable; it is not prudent and it is disempowering to women, ethnic minorities and disabled people. If we want to keep and empower women in work, and to empower ethnic minorities and disabled people, we need a strong economy. We get a strong economy by managing the books and the finances prudently. This recent autumn statement set out by the Chancellor is a real reflection of how we do that, with the commitment to raising the tax-free personal allowance to £12,500; raising the national living wage from £7.20 to £7.50 in April; aligning national insurance thresholds for employees and employers; rolling out 30 hours of tax-free childcare; and introducing shared parental leave and flexible working.

Those are all conditions that empower women, and when the conditions are right, we get the results, and the results speak for themselves. Granted, there is more to do, but the gender pay gap is the lowest on record, with more women-led businesses than ever, contributing £80 billion to the economy per year. There are no all-male boards in the FTSE top companies. Britain has been voted the best country in Europe for women to set up a business. Those are the facts.

This is a Government who create the conditions to help make work pay, to strengthen our economy in a sustainable and prudent way. In doing so, we are all empowered. We are all empowered—as women, as ethnic people, as disabled people, as people from disadvantage. It does not matter what your background is; you can achieve your potential, with no limits on your aspiration. That is why I shall vote against the Opposition motion.

3.18 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): In the 2016 autumn statement, 85% of the net savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit measures come from women. Here I go again, as promised, speaking up for the 2.6 million women who have been adversely affected by this Government’s chaotic mismanagement of the pension age increase. Action to address the situation of those who have lost out is needed to ensure that everyone is treated fairly in the process of increasing the state pension age for women. An estimated 500,000 women born in the 1950s have been affected by the changes in the state pension. Changes to state and public sector pensions will disproportionately affect women, who already make up two thirds of the UK’s poorest pensioners.

I have nothing new to say, because hon. Members have heard it all before. No further explanation of the situation is needed, because Opposition Members all acknowledge that those 1950s women—the WASPI generation—are experiencing gross injustice. Today we are talking about equality, and those women do not have equality. The Government have the opportunity to redress that inequality, do the right thing and make appropriate transitional payments for the 1950s WASPI women.

3.19 pm

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I welcome any support for women. Women make up half the population and contribute a great deal to our economy. We need to focus on ensuring that we have a strong economy, because through a strong economy we protect women as well as men, disabled people as well as able-bodied people, and people of all races. With a strong economy, all those people will prosper. I am pleased that our growth under this Conservative Government is second only to that of the US.

It is unfortunate that Labour Members focus on the negatives, not the positives, and that they do not seek to raise ambitions and aspiration for all society. I would like to highlight four positives in relation to women: for those who are young, for those who are on low wages, for those who are more skilled, and by way of international comparison.

First, I do not think that it is appropriate to talk down young women. Girls often do better than boys in school, and more women than men go to university. Secondly, I want to recognise the benefit of the Government’s policies for women on lower salaries. Men as well as women benefit from the national living wage going up to £9 by 2020. If, as the Opposition say, women are paid less than men, the policy will disproportionately benefit women.

Thirdly, let us not forget the strides that have been made for the higher paid. We have no all-male FTSE 100 boards, and the number of women on FTSE 100 boards went up to 26% in 2015, from 13% in 2011. Fourthly, it is important to consider how we are doing by comparison with other countries internationally. The World Economic
[Lucy Frazer]

Forum gender gap measures and ranks the level of equality of opportunity between men and women. We are 20th out of 144, ranking above Canada, the US and Australia.

The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) stated that she was proud of successive Labour achievements. She failed to mention that according to a Fabian Society study, only 36% of Labour councillors, 16% of council leaders and 11% of the most senior Labour staff are women. I want an economy and a society that work for everyone, of every race, gender and religion.

Robert Courts: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Lucy Frazer: I have just finished.

3.22 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I am going to talk about the productivity gap, which was mentioned in the autumn statement. I am going to stick to talking about the autumn statement, because that is the subject of the motion. The productivity gap is, in my opinion, one of the things we fail on repeatedly because we forget half the population. Members have talked about the infrastructure spending that was announced in the autumn statement, but we all know—let us stop pretending that we do not—that that will mainly create jobs that are filled with men. I am asking the Government to do something about it.

During the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into the gender pay gap, Minister after Minister pledged their desire to do something about it. The inquiry found clear evidence that the segmenting of jobs exacerbated the gender pay gap. Ministers—including those who were on the Front Bench earlier—have sat in front of me and said that they want to see more women in science, tech, engineering and maths. I have travelled to the UN with one of the Ministers who was on the Front Bench earlier to talk about how brilliantly the UK was doing in that field.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady recognise the importance of the point made by one of my colleagues yesterday that even if the 500,000 jobs coming from the industrial strategy were all given to disabled people, that still would not close the disability gap, let alone the gender gap?

Jess Phillips: I do, indeed, recognise that, and I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. We must all recognise that we have so much more to do in this area.

The announcement of billions of extra pounds in the autumn statement represents a real opportunity for the Government to invest in construction and engineering jobs, and in tech innovation. The money provides a lever for the allocation of money to be used not only to build and make things, but to achieve some of their other aims, which they have travelled the world saying they cared about.

After the statement, I set about asking Ministers how they would make sure this money—the money of taxpayers, including all the women who pay taxes—was going to be spent on our prosperity. I asked the Chancellor if he had plans to set targets for women’s employment. I wonder whether we can guess what he said. He did not say, “Why, yes, we will stay true to our word about women’s gainful employment and the breaking down of gendered roles in employment.” No, he said:

“The government has no plans to set targets for women’s employment to be achieved as a result of the National Productivity Investment Fund”.

It is clear that women will not only lose out from the cuts, but make no gains when the Government finally decide to start spending money. A huge amount of research shows that instead of always reaching for shovels when we spend on infrastructure, we need to see our people services as infrastructure. Investment in childcare and, very topically, in care services creates more jobs than any road building, and it also has double the effect on productivity by freeing up adults of working age from the extra responsibilities that stop them working. I need not say that that mainly applies to women.

I am asking for it to be made a condition in the tendering process for all contracts involving the commissioning of all this money on infrastructure that providers must have a plan showing how they will attract more women into such roles. I would ask Ministers to set targets and quotas, but I know that they will not do so, regardless of all the evidence in favour of doing so. They have evidence-based policies only when they want. No contract should be allocated without such a workable plan being submitted.

I ask the Government to monitor how many women’s jobs are created by the national productivity investment fund, so that we women taxpayers of the country can see exactly what we are getting back for our investment. Monitoring this will allow the Government to see if they are doing a good job for half the population. Just hoping this stuff gets done is no longer good enough. Government policy cannot be based on the triumph of hope over experience. The idea that progress will take another 60 years is simply not good enough.

Experience and evidence now show that only 1% of direct construction jobs are held by women, as are 14% of jobs across the entire construction industry, including all administration jobs. In that field, there is a 16% gender pay gap. We are therefore investing in a sector where women do not have jobs, or in which when they do get them, they can expect to be paid considerably less than their male colleagues. I want this investment in house building, road building, research and development, but I just want the benefits to be shared equally. At the moment, women are getting 1%, while 99% goes elsewhere. I am not shroud-waving or being negative, as Government Members say. I am standing here and waving, hoping that the Government notice that, on productivity, there is a female of the species.

3.28 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The motion is about the autumn statement, but we must accept that this is not just about the autumn statement. We are talking about the cumulative effects over the decade between 2010 and 2020. Those with the lowest 10% of incomes stand to lose 21% of their income by 2020. This will affect people with disability. We have debated in this place the cuts to the employment and support allowance work-related activity group, and we
know about the changes to the personal independence payment and about the removal of Motability cars, which will stop someone with disability getting work. We have also heard about the gender impact and the impact on black and minority ethnic people. The changes to tax have definitely helped men, and they have helped those who are not at the bottom. Sadly, those right at the bottom are probably not paying tax, so a change in the tax threshold does not help them. Some 72% of those on the 40% tax rate are men, so they are the ones who benefit.

Just in case the Government have forgotten some of the things that have happened in recent years, I will put my specs on and read the list. We had changes to child benefit, which is important because it is usually paid to the mother. There was a cut in childcare support within working tax credit, the baby element of tax credits was removed and the threshold for working tax credit for couples with children increased from working 16 hours to working 24 hours. There have been reductions in housing benefit support that hit women, as they make up most of the households with a single adult. Lone parents on income support now need to move on to jobseeker's allowance once their child is five—92% of lone parents are women. The health in pregnancy grant was axed and Sure Start maternity grants were axed after the first child. There are charges for access to child maintenance services and, indeed, to employment tribunals, which affect women when they try to bring inequality cases.

There have been benefit caps and benefit freezes. Some 89% of the people who are hit by those are in households with children and 50% are lone parents. I say again, 92% of lone parents are women. We know about the cuts to come in universal credit and the “pretendy” U-turn on tax credits, as the cuts simply come in as universal credit rolls out. Paying universal credit to one person in the household presents a real danger where domestic abuse and manipulation are part of the family.

The key issue is that there has not been a cumulative impact assessment on all the changes added together for gender, ethnicity and disability. The two biggest groups that are affected are lone parents, particularly lone mothers, and single women pensioners. As we heard earlier, lone parents stand to lose £4,000—an eye-watering amount of their income. Women pensioners have faced a 19% pay gap over their lifetime. That means they have less savings and a bigger reliance on the state pension. Of course, we also have the WASPI issue.

What all that results in is a health impact. The Government talk about NHS sustainability, but the biggest driver of ill health is poverty. We faff around talking about smoking, weight and all the things people should do, but according to the Marmot report, the difference is poverty. The biggest change that has ever happened in public health came from changing the London sewers. We should be trying to eliminate poverty and give children a decent start in life.

Since 2010, women have been hit three times harder by tax and benefit changes than men. Eighty-six per cent of tax and benefit savings have been taken from women. That is a further increase of 5% since last year’s autumn statement. Female-headed households will be affected the most. They will see the largest drop in living standards between 2010 and 2020, and that is happening under a Conservative-led Government.

In her maiden speech on the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister said:

“If you are a woman, you will earn less than a man.”

That is absolutely true. The gender pay gap needs to be tackled now. The Labour Government closed it by a third, but according to the United Nations, on the current rate of progress, it will take Britain another 70 years to bridge the divide between men’s and women’s pay.

I have highlighted the fact that women are being paid less, but they are also paying the price of austerity. According to the Women’s Budget Group, women in work will be £1,000 a year worse off on average as a result of the autumn statement. Their male counterparts will lose £555 a year. As has been highlighted, low-earning women will be the worst affected of any group. Women who are employed and earn below-average incomes will find themselves £1,678 a year poorer.

The effects of the autumn statement are also detrimental for women who rely on the welfare system for support. The cuts, including the reduction in the benefit cap and the cuts to tax credits, child support and carer’s allowance, heavily affect single parents. Nine out of 10 single parents are women. For women in work the Government trumpet the raise in the personal tax allowance as “lifting people out of tax” yet ignore the 43% of people who do not earn enough even to pay income tax, 66% of whom are women and whom this measure benefits not one jot.

Since coming into government in 2010 the Conservatives have stated repeatedly that they have a long-term economic plan. With a new Chancellor and Prime Minister, in the autumn statement they seemed to change course and now promise to target the just about managing—the JAMs. Sadly, all I can see is them getting themselves into a long-term economic jam. I have to ask, who are these people who are just about managing? Do the just about managing need inheritance tax to be scrapped on homes worth up to £1 million? Is it helpful to give £21 billion in tax cuts to the richest half of households—are they just about managing now? Or is it just about managing to be able to afford to blow £1,000 on designer accessories? Many of my constituents can no longer just about manage. They are in fact not coping at all, having borne the unfair burden of this Government’s austerity policies.

If this Government want a Britain that works for everyone, they should not be allowing women to be paid less while paying the price for their unequal policies. In a spirit of positivity, I ask the Government to begin addressing the mass inequality they have dealt to UK women, and recommend that they start with a gender audit of their own policies and gender analysis of future Budgets so we can at least begin to eradicate the imbalance that burdens women here in the UK.

3.32 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this debate and for all the work she has done to highlight this important matter.
Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Quite a lot of percentages and stats have been mentioned. I will throw a few more in, but not that many, in the hope that we will not bamboozle everyone too much.

The Government have been saying that things are getting better for women and that the autumn statement must therefore be okay. They have tried pretty much to gloss over the fact that the autumn statement was written without considering the impact on the two different genders. Afterwards, they tried to fudge a response to the question that inevitably came. That is the situation, and it is not good enough—it is not good enough for the Government simply to fudge this issue.

The position that women are starting from is not a level playing field. More than 90% of lone parents are female. The gender pay gap in the UK is still 13.9% for full-time employees—that figure is from the Fawcett Society. Women are 60% of those earning below the living wage, by which I mean the real living wage, not the “pretendy” one. Women make up only 27% of higher rate taxpayers. We are starting from a position of disadvantage, in which there is a gender pay gap. The Government cannot simply say that they are not doing anything bad to women. They need to stand up and say that they will do good things for women. They need policies that make the situation better, rather than simply trying to stand still. As I have said, women do not start on a level playing field.

We should also really criticise the Government because they keep saying that the Library briefings and the evidence provided are wrong. They cannot say the evidence is wrong just because they disagree with it. That does not make it wrong; it simply means that they disagree with it. It is the same with the national living wage. The Government cannot call it a national living wage and then expect people to be able to live on it just because they have called it that. That is not how these things work. They need to make actual changes.

In November 2013, the Full Fact website did some work looking at Labour’s work and policies on the gender pay gap. It said that “women just tend to be in the groups more affected by benefit changes.”

That is absolutely the case, because of the percentage of women who are lone parents, and are therefore managing a household on their own, along with the reduction in the number of benefits being given to people with children—because of all of these changes, which disproportionately affect women. We start from a position in society of less privilege, fewer opportunities and less advantage. The Government need to do the opposite of what they are doing; they need to be making positive interventions.

The speech about people being able to climb up the ladder was frankly rubbish. People cannot climb up the ladder. People of my generation are having more trouble climbing up it than those of the previous generation. Things are going backwards. We are getting worse. People from less affluent backgrounds, women, those from black and ethnic minority backgrounds and disabled people have struggled more in the last few years to climb up that ladder than they did 20 or 30 years ago, when there was the possibility of that dream. The Government talk about how 26%, or something, of people on a FTSE 100 board are now female. For a start, that is nowhere 50%; moreover, of those heading up FTSE 100 boards, only five are women. That needs to be fixed.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this important debate, and I am pleased that she referred in her excellent contribution to maternity and paternity leave, because I would like to focus on the plight of parents of premature babies, a group that really is struggling to manage. The autumn statement was a missed opportunity to offer them the better help they need. Although maternity provision in the UK is generally good by international standards, it does not work for parents whose babies are born long before their due date. These tiny babies, born too soon to live without medical support, can be on life support in incubators for weeks, or even months. The parents cannot hold them because they are encased in machinery with wires, tubes and bleeping monitors as they fight for their lives.

Paid maternity leave lasts for about six months, but it is triggered the moment the child is born; there is no flexibility if the baby spends several of those first vital months inside an incubator on a special care unit. That means that the child is doubly disadvantaged, first by being born too weak and frail to live without medical support and with illnesses that can often last for years, and secondly by being denied the full period of time that healthier babies get to bond with their parents. Holding, cuddling and breastfeeding are all vital to a baby’s healthy development, but a premature baby never gets back the time they spend in an incubator.

The stress of watching their baby struggling to live leaves one in every five mums of premature babies with mental ill health, which is another issue that the autumn statement ignored. On average, the parents of premature babies spend an extra £2,000 on the costs of overnight accommodation, hospital parking and eating in expensive hospital cafeterias. For many parents, that is money they simply do not have, and it pushes many into debt that they struggle to get out of afterwards. It is difficult not just for mums but for dads, too. They still only get 10 days’ paid paternity leave, even if their baby is born months early, so at a time when their newborn child is fighting for its life and the child’s mother needs help the most, many dads are sent straight back to work.

Those parents need an extension of paid maternity and paternity leave that takes into account how premature their baby is. There would be a relatively small up-front cost to the Government, but it would save far more public money in the long term by keeping parents in work, helping vulnerable babies to develop more healthily by having that vital time to bond, reducing mothers’ mental ill health and reducing the child’s need for later medical interventions. Of course, the human benefit for families would be way beyond any financial calculation.

I took a group of campaigners and mums of premature babies to share their stories with the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Margot James), and I look forward to hearing her views on what she heard. I hope that the Government will reflect on the damage they have done to families these past six years and,
in this case at least, do the right thing and support parents who need us to do the right thing for them so that they can do the right thing for their families.

3.44 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for championing this issue so well today. I also thank all of today’s fantastic speakers. We have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and for Croydon North (Mr Reed), from the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), and from the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer). We heard from them on a range of issues, from the gross injustice faced by the WASPI women, the disability work gap, the productivity gap and the benefit cap to the universal credit cuts, paternity rights and the fact that austerity and cuts have ultimately fallen largely on the shoulders of women over recent years.

Last month’s autumn statement was an opportunity for the new Chancellor to signal a change of direction and repair some of the damage caused by six years of Conservative failure. Indeed, we were told that our cumulative deficit would be £122 billion by 2021, a far cry from the eradication of the deficit that we were promised by 2015. We have seen six wasted years, in which the deficit has spiralled, debt has spiralled and productivity, which drives our economy, has hit rock bottom; six years of pernicious cuts and schemes aimed at dismantling and marketising our public services, which are now teetering on the edge of a cliff; six years in which the wealthiest enjoyed tax giveaways, while the most vulnerable saw their incomes savagely cut.

How did women fare in all this? I was quietly optimistic before the statement, given that we have a female Prime Minister after all, and she waxed lyrical in the days preceding the statement that the Government would help the so-called just about managing. Sadly, nothing could have been further from the truth. As we have heard, the autumn statement ensures that 86% of cuts will still come from women. There was nothing for those dubbed “just about managing”, no reversal of universal credit cuts, no reversal of cuts to employment and support allowance, nothing for our NHS and not even a mention of social care. The figures are even more depressing. Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that real wages will not recover to 2008 levels even by 2021. This is unprecedented in modern British history, and that is before we even start looking at the gender pay gap.

The statement was sadly noteworthy more for what it was missing than what it achieved, but perhaps most disappointing was the Chancellor’s failure to address the disproportionate impact of the past six years on women. He had his chance. For example, Labour made it clear that we would support him should he fully reverse cuts to universal credit, yet he chose not to and announced a meagre change to the taper rate, which will do little to mitigate the effect of the wider cuts, which disproportionately affect women.

The House of Commons Library helpfully modelled the effects of the changes on different family situations. A lone parent on the national living wage with one child is now to experience a net loss of £2,600 in 2020-21 with the reduced taper rate. Of course, that is a desperate situation for any family, but further analysis shows, interestingly, that single female adults make up 88% of total single adults in receipt of the child and/or working tax credits that form part of the new universal credit bundle.

Not only did the statement fail to address the discrepancy in the impact of tax and benefit changes, but the systematic failure to properly fund our public services impacts on women more than men. For example, the social care sector is in crisis. In fact, it is not just in crisis; it is on the brink of collapse, which in turn puts even greater pressure on our already creaking NHS. Yet the autumn statement did not provide a single penny. Not only is this situation untenable for all in need of care, but the chronic underfunding excessively impacts on women. Women are the main recipients of social care services and constitute the majority of both paid and unpaid carers. About 80% of all jobs in adult social care are held by women, and let us be honest: the majority of them are not very well paid.

The Government seem to be suggesting that allowing local authorities to raise council tax will address the situation, but we on the Labour Benches know that such a solution creates severe geographical discrepancies and will go nowhere near plugging the gap. In fact, in my constituency of Salford and Eccles it will not even touch the sides of what we need to fund our social care system.

I began by saying that the autumn statement was an opportunity for the new Chancellor to change direction. Sadly he missed that chance, but the Minister today has another chance to correct the gender imbalance that the economic policies of the last six years have created. We need to address the fact that tonight, in my constituency, some women are going to struggle to put themselves to bed. Women will stay on late at work—just to counteract the entrenched gender stereotype in our dog-eat-dog job market—often working longer and harder than their male counterparts for far less pay. Some mothers who have been hit by the pernicious cuts of the last six years will struggle to feed their children and themselves. All these women will dream of a future for their daughter—a future that takes them away from the desperation and shattered ambition that has seeped into society over the past six years.

The Government talk a lot about aspiration, and we have heard some of their words today. Their words, however, are hollow, and the clock has, frankly, been turned back on gender equality over the last six wasted years, with an economic plan that has failed Britain and failed women.

3.50 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): We have certainly had a wide-ranging debate today, if perhaps a little too focused, touching on many subjects of fundamental importance to our society and indeed to this Government. I would like to thank Members of all parties for their contributions.
In truth, I think we all want to see an economy that works for everyone in our society, whether it be women, men, people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds—all groups. It is right to scrutinise our success in delivering on that. Historically, women and black and minority ethnic groups have been disproportionately represented in lower-income groups. We all acknowledge that, but we have not heard much from the Opposition about the broad action necessary to address that long-term historical trend. It is important to address it in the long term, which my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) touched on.

We have just heard from the Opposition that “aspiration” is an empty word. Actually, at the heart of Conservative Members’ contributions has been the idea that it is aspiration that will address this problem in the long term, and that can be seen in some of the actions we have taken. We have sought to raise aspirations to ensure that the next generation does better than the current one, particularly in some of the lower-income groups.

What, then, have we been doing? Fundamental to everything—I realise that this is something that the Opposition will never agree with on and will never engage with—is a stronger economy. That underpins doing the best for everyone in our society so that they can enjoy a greater level of prosperity and higher living standards. [Interruption.] The Opposition Front-Bench team can chunter all they want, but their failure to engage with the fundamental issue of having a credible plan for our economy, for bringing down debt over time and for putting our public finances on a sustainable basis perhaps explains why only five Labour Back Benchers were in the Chamber at the beginning of this Opposition day debate. It perhaps explains why large parts of the Labour party have lost faith in their own Front Benchers. It is a consequence of their failure to engage with the fundamental truths of our economy. That issue underpins everything that we have come here to discuss today, but we have heard nothing from the Opposition about some of the key issues.

In stark contrast, we have heard from Government Members about what we are doing to maintain the focus on making this country somewhere where our businesses can grow, where people can succeed and where we can provide more jobs and more opportunities for all working people. There is a stark contrast with the Labour record, which saw female unemployment rise by a quarter, whereas we have a record employment rate. We have seen 1.2 million women find work since 2010, including 400,000 women from black and minority ethnic groups.

The House should also note—Conservative Members noted it with pleasure—that the gender pay gap has fallen to a new record low. Yes, there is further to go, but all we got from the Opposition was sarcasm, instead of saying, “Yes, we have made progress and we want to do better.” But progress we have made, and it is all about laying the foundation for rising wealth for all working people. It means having a sensible fiscal plan to get our finances under control, and it means backing British business to deliver strong growth in our economy, without which we cannot create jobs for anyone.

I was slightly mystified by the dismissive tone taken by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) on investment and infrastructure. I am glad that she engaged with the autumn statement announcements on infrastructure, but she dismissed the investment in road building, for example, as being about creating jobs in construction. That infrastructure money, whether for road building or digital infrastructure, is directly intended to help people start businesses and grow them quicker. Record numbers of women have started businesses in this country over the past six years, and it is evident that investment in improving our digital infrastructure is key to some of those companies, because women have been extraordinarily entrepreneurial when it comes to starting new online businesses.

Jess Phillips: Only 17% of jobs in innovation and technology are held by women, but we can look at that again.

Words have repeatedly, and wrongly, been put in my mouth throughout this debate. I never once said that I did not want infrastructure spending on roads; I said that I also want infrastructure spending on care. That money should be spent equally on women’s jobs and men’s jobs. All I am asking is that we record the data so that we can see if that works.

Jane Ellison: I am responding directly to that point. Infrastructure investment is about enabling the creation of more jobs and enabling more businesses to grow. We obviously agree on that point, but it is nonsense to say that men benefit disproportionately. We know that more women have started businesses and that more women are in employment, so the things we are doing to enable people to grow businesses and create jobs are directly benefiting all kinds of workers. That is fundamentally what we are about.

We heard from my hon. Friends—sadly, there was nothing from the Opposition—about the number of women on boards, the number of women in employment and the number of businesses being started by women. It is impossible to have this kind of debate if the Opposition will not acknowledge any of that or the progress made. They will not acknowledge, for example, that when the personal allowance rises to £11,500 next year, 1.3 million people will be taken out of income tax, 59% of whom are women. My colleagues talked about the investments we have made for working families through tax-free childcare, the reduction of the universal credit taper, funding for more affordable homes and investment in quality public services, meaning that more children are in good or outstanding schools. However, mention of that came there none from Opposition Members. It is as if none of those things have happened.

We carefully consider the implications of all of our measures both for protected equality groups, in line with the Equality Act 2010, and for households at different points on the income distribution. I refer hon. Members once again to the comprehensive distributional analysis that we published alongside the autumn statement. It showed—again, we did not hear about this—that only the wealthiest households would experience modest losses as a result of the measures in the autumn statement.

That is why the top 1% of income taxpayers in our society today pay a greater share of income tax than in any year under the previous Labour Government, but we did not hear about that either.
We want to see women and men of all races and ages and from all parts of our country grow increasingly prosperous, and key to that is investing in a strong economy that produces jobs and opportunities for working people. That is what we have been working to deliver since 2010. That is why we have more women in work and more women-led businesses than ever before. That is why we have increased support for families and individuals in their day-to-day lives, whether through measures to increase the national living wage, which are ridiculously dismissed by Opposition Members, or by cutting income tax for millions of people.

Crucially, women are a much more important part of this country's economy than the Opposition give us credit for. We are so much more than they would have it, more skilled, more willing to help and more able to contribute to our country's economy than the Opposition give us credit for. W e are so much more than they would have it, more skilled, more willing to help and more able to contribute to our economy—and long may it be so. This Government remain committed to ensuring that that continues into the future.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.


Division No. 111

AYES [3.59 pm

Abbott, Ms Diane Cooper, Julie Cooper, Rosie Cooper, rh Yvette Corbyn, rh Jeremy Cowan, Ronnie Coyle, Neil Crausby, Mr David Creagh, Mary Creasy, Stella Cummins, Judith Cunningham, Mr Jim Dakin, Nic Danczuk, Simon David, Wayne Davies, Geralyn De Piero, Gloria Docherty-Hughes, Martin Doughtry, Stephen Dowd, Jim Dowd, Peter Dromey, Jack Durkan, Mark Eagle, Ms Angela Eagle, Maria Edwards, Jonathan Efford, Clive Elliot, Julie Ellman, Mrs Louise Elmore, Chris Esterson, Bill Evans, Chris Farron, Tim Fellows, Marion Ferrier, Margaret Field, rh Frank Fitzpatrick, Jim Fielio, Robert Fletcher, Colin Flint, rh Caroline Flynn, Paul Fovargue, Yvonne Furniss, Gill Gapes, Mike Gardiner, Barry Gethins, Stephen Gibson, Patricia Glass, Pat Glindon, Mary Goodman, Helen Grady, Patrick Grant, Peter Gray, Neil Green, Kate Greenwood, Lilian Greenwood, Margaret Gwynne, Andrew Haigh, Louise Hanson, rh Mr David Harman, rh Ms Harriet Harris, Carolyn Hayes, Helen Healey, rh John Hendrick, Mr Mark Hendry, Drew Hillier, Meg Hodge, rh Dame Margaret Hodgson, Mrs Sharon Hollow, Kate Hopkins, Kelvin Howarth, rh Mr George Huq, Dr Rupa Hussen, Imran Johnson, rh Alan Johnson, Diana Jones, Gerald Jones, Mr Kevan Kane, Mike Keeley, Barbara Kendall, Liz Kerevan, George Kerr, Calum Kinnock, Stephen Kyle, Peter Lamb, rh Norman Lamby, rh Mr David Lavery, Ian Law, Chris Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma Lewis, Clive Long Bailey, Rebecca Lucas, Caroline Lucas, Ian C. Lynch, Holly MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan Madders, Justin Mahwood, Shabana Malhotra, Seema Marris, Rob Marsden, Gordon Maskell, Rachael Matheson, Christian McCabe, Steve McAig, Callum McCarthy, Kerry McDonald, Andy McDonald, Stuart C. McDonnell, rh John McFadden, rh Mr Pat McNinnies, Liz McMahon, Jim Meams, lan Miliband, rh Edward Monaghan, Dr Paul Moon, Mrs Madeleine Morden, Jessica Mullin, Roger Murray, Ian Nandy, Lisa Newlands, Gavin O'Hara, Brendan Olney, Sarah Oon, Melanie Onwurah, Chi Osamor, Kate Oswald, Kirsten Owen, Albert Paterson, Steven Pearce, Teresa Pennycook, Matthew Perkins, Toby Phillips, Jess Phillipson, Bridget Pound, Stephen Powell, Lucy Qureshi, Yasmin Rayner, Angela Reed, Mr Jamie Reed, Mr Steve Rees, Christina Reeves, Rachel Reynolds, Emma Reynolds, Jonathan Ritchie, Ms Margaret Robertson, rh Angus Robinson, Mr Geoffrey Ryyan, rh Joan Saville Roberts, Liz Shah, Naz Sheerman, Mr Barry Sheppard, Tommy Sherriff, Paula Shuker, Mr Gavin Skinner, Mr Dennis Slaughter, Andy Smeeth, Ruth Smith, rh Mr Andrew Smith, Angela Smith, Cat Smith, Nick Smith, Owen Smyth, Karin Stephens, Chris Stevens, Jo Streeting, Wes Stringer, Graham Stuart, rh Ms Gisela Tami, Mark Thewliss, Alison Thomas, Mr Gareth Thompson, Owen Thomson, Michelle Thomberry, Emily Timms, rh Stephen Turley, Anna Turner, Karl Twigg, Derek Twigg, Stephen Ummuna, Mr Chuka Vaz, rh Keith Vaz, Valerie Watson, Mr Tom Weir, Mike West, Catherine Whiteford, Dr Eilidh

Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittord, Dr Philippa
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie

Wishart, Pete
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and Vicky Foxcroft

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Carmichael, Neil
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn

Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evnethett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauge, rh Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hand, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard

Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holllingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Saajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Dr Caroline
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, rh Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, rh Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitton, rh Anne
Mordant, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morriss, David
Morriss, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Osborne, rh Mr George
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Pannin, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Poultier, Dr Daniel
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Aloke
Shelbrooke, Alex
Simpson, David
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Rosyton
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Strreete, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.12 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that the number of homeless households rose by 44 per cent between 2009-10 and 2015-16 to almost 60,000; further notes that the number of people sleeping rough doubled between 2010 and 2015; notes with concern that across the UK 120,000 children will be homeless this Christmas; recognises that between 1997 and 2001 there was an unprecedented fall in homelessness; and calls on the Government to end rough sleeping and take action to address the root causes of rising homelessness.

With 10 days to go to Christmas, a record number of homeless people are sleeping on our streets, in shop doorways and on park benches. More than 100,000 children will spend Christmas day in temporary accommodation—children with no home, young lives scarred by insecurity and impermanence. That shames us all. Homelessness is not inevitable in a country as decent and well-off as ours. It is a problem that we can solve. We know what works, because we have done it before. The Labour Government reduced rough sleeping by three quarters, and cut statutory homelessness to levels that led the independent audit by Crisis and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to declare “an unprecedented decline”. I had hoped that this debate, called in the face of rapidly rising homelessness on all fronts, would be the basis for fresh thinking and a new national will to put an end to the scandal of people sleeping rough on the street for want of somewhere to stay. I still do, but I am disappointed that the Government have rejected our motion, which simply sets out the facts. I say to Ministers and to Government Members who may support them today that they can delete our motion but they cannot deny the facts.

The facts speak for themselves. Rough sleeping fell by about three quarters under Labour; it has doubled under the Conservatives since 2010. The number of households accepted legally as homeless fell by two thirds under Labour, but has risen by nearly half since 2010. The total number of children in temporary accommodation has risen every year since 2010 to over 100,000 in England and 120,000 across the UK. For the avoidance of doubt, the source of these facts and figures is the Communities Secretary himself. If he or his colleagues on the Front Bench need to check, the figures are from Tables 1, 770 and 775.

Let us compare the feeble facts and figures in the Government’s amendment. The Government are pleased with the provision of temporary accommodation, when this can mean whole families sleeping in one bed. It can mean lights that do not work, no fridge, no cooker, no locks on the doors. The Government are spending more money on homelessness. The sums of £315 million, £149 million and £50 million are totals over a full year of Parliament and are dwarfed by the scale of cuts—£5 billion of cuts to housing benefit, and the Supporting People funding halved. Finally, the Government say they are committed to building more homes, when the number of affordable homes being built has hit its lowest level in 24 years, and the number of new social
John Healey: It is a very good question. I have not met or talked with anyone who believes that such deep cuts, targeted so harshly on young people, will do anything but compound the growing crisis of homelessness in this country. The issue is one of the causes of the spiralling scandal we see, and it is one of the things Ministers really must tackle.

In one of the media interviews I did today before the debate, the presenter said she was shocked the other day to see someone who was homeless pitching a tent in the middle of central London. That will not shock my hon. Friends, and many of them may remember the mass homelessness of the 1980s and 1990s, with tent cities in central London. However, one of the biggest forgotten successes of the last Labour Government was the reduction of rough sleeping to record low levels. We introduced the national rough sleepers unit, a comprehensive intervention plan, ground-breaking legislation, fresh investment and a target to cut rough sleeping by two thirds, which we hit a year early.

However, the time has now come to do better and to end rough sleeping so that no one need sleep on the streets. This is unfinished business for Labour, so today I have made a pledge on behalf of the Labour party that we will end rough sleeping within our first term back in government. This pledge is backed by a plan to double the capacity of the housing scheme ring-fenced for people with a history of rough sleeping. Yes, of course, more street rescue schemes, better access to healthcare and more secure homeless hostel funding are all needed, but we cannot help the homeless if we do not build the homes. Under Labour’s plan, 4,000 additional housing association homes would be earmarked for rough sleepers to help them move out of hostels and rebuild their lives, with Government funding new social rented homes to replace them.

That would be the first part of a new national rough sleeping strategy. It would, in fact, renew a stalled programme started by a Conservative Housing Minister, Sir George Young, in 1991. This clearing house scheme works across London, but it has never been set up in some of the other large cities in this country—cities such as Birmingham, Liverpool, Bristol and Leeds.

In conclusion, a Prime Minister who promises on the steps of Downing Street a country that works for everyone simply should not tolerate the scandal of today’s spiralling homelessness. The Government could do these things now. They would have wide support. The National Housing Federation has said today of Labour’s new plan that it will enable housing associations “to boost their offer to the increasing numbers of rough sleepers.” St Mungo’s, the largest homeless charity providing support for rough sleepers, says:

“We strongly welcome this commitment to ending rough sleeping and the call for a national rough sleeping strategy.”

We, too, would back the Government if they acted on Labour’s plan. Tackling homelessness can and should be a cross-party commitment, with a new national will to solve what is a growing problem. Let us hope that this debate helps start to forge exactly that shared determination.

4.24 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to the end of the Question and add:

“notes that homelessness is lower now than its peak in 2003-04; further notes that England has a strong safety net, and that the
 provision of temporary accommodation means no family with a child ever has to be without a roof over their heads; notes that the Government is going further with legislative protection by supporting the hon. Member for Harrow East’s Homelessness Reduction Bill to ensure that everyone gets the help they need to prevent or relieve their homelessness; welcomes the Government’s protection of £315 million homelessness prevention funding for local authorities and £149 million in central funding; notes in particular the recently launched £50 million homelessness prevention programme, helping areas all over the country to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping; and notes that one of the best ways to tackle homelessness is by increasing the housing supply, which the measures contained in the forthcoming Housing White Paper will address.”

Government Members welcome this debate. Nobody is hiding from the facts. Both statutory homelessness and rough sleeping are rising, and it is right that we discuss why that is happening and what we need to do to deal with it.

I want to start with a couple of party political points in response to some of the points that the shadow Housing Minister made, but then move on to talk about the substance of the issue and what needs to be done. The motion gives a slightly rose-tinted view of the record of the previous Labour Government. I am happy to give credit where it is due, and if Members will bear with me for a couple of minutes I will then happily take interventions. The motion would have us believe that from the moment the Labour party was elected, interventions. The motion would have us believe that from the moment the Labour party was elected, homelessness began to fall and continued to fall during its period in office. These are the facts.

In 1998, some 104,000 were people accepted as homeless. That figure rose throughout Labour’s first term in government until halfway through its second term, peaking at about 135,000 in 2003. Then, to their credit, the Government addressed it, and it fell significantly to 41,780 by 2010. It is not insignificant at all, and I am happy to give credit for that.

John Healey rose—

Gavin Barwell: I will just finish the point and then I shall be happy to take interventions. The figure has risen since then to 56,500—not by as much as the motion suggests and certainly to nowhere near the record peak that it reached in Labour’s second term.

There are two other measures that we should look at, one of which is the measure of housing supply. The best measure of that is the net additions to the housing stock each year.

John Healey rose—

Gavin Barwell: I will cover the three points and then take the right hon. Gentleman’s intervention.

Over the course of the Labour Government, in the first year the figure was 149,000, then 148,000, and then 132,000, 146,000, 159,000, 170,000, 185,000, 202,000, 214,000, 223,000, 182,000 and 144,000 respectively. In not one year of those years did the previous Labour Government build enough homes, and in only three did they build more than the current Government are achieving—and that was at the height of an unsustainable housing boom that ended up crashing our economy.

The third measure by which we should assess the housing record of the previous Labour Government is affordability. In 1997, the ratio between median earnings and median house prices was 3.54. By 2010, it had increased to 7.01. I am happy to acknowledge that in the subsequent five years of the coalition Government it increased further to 7.63. Looking at all those three measures, while the Labour Government certainly did some good things, and I have no problem with giving them credit for that, the record is far less rosy than the motion suggests.

John Healey: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He sounds as though he is rehearsing to become the Chancellor giving an autumn statement or a Budget statement. This Government promised in their 2015 manifesto to see 1 million new homes built in this country. They are so far off track, even at the current levels, that it could take until 2025—five years late—to build the number of homes that are needed. The number of new affordable homes built is the lowest on record.

We are talking about homelessness. It is absolutely the case that when Labour came into government in 1997 we were faced with a rapidly rising trend of homelessness, just as we are facing with a rapidly rising trend of homelessness now. The difference was that Labour acted. The figure peaked in 2003, and homelessness over the next period was cut by two thirds. The question for the Minister is this: is he going to act now? Are the Government going to do anything about the rapidly rising and scandalously spiralling level of homelessness we see today?

Gavin Barwell: That was a long intervention that did not refute any of the points, but let me deal quickly with each of them. First, on supply, the Government are behind but not way behind, as the right hon. Gentleman suggests they are. In 2015-16, the first year of the five years of the Parliament, we delivered 190,000, exactly as the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) has just said, and to meet the 1 million target we need to be at 200,000 a year. I will return to the subject of affordable homes later, if the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) will bear with me. The fundamental point that I was trying to make is that we could do with a little less complacency from those on the Opposition Front Bench. Bear with me for a second. There is no room for complacency on this side of the House, either.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab) rose—

Gavin Barwell: Let me develop the point; then I will happily give way.

Homelessness and rough sleeping are both rising. The right hon. Gentleman quoted the speech that the Prime Minister made on the steps of Downing Street, in which she said that the mission of this Government is to make Britain a country that works not for a privileged few, but for every one of us. Sorting out our failing housing market and tackling the moral stain of homelessness are central to that mission. I want to spend the rest of my speech setting out how we propose to do that, but first I give way.

Rob Marris: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his generosity today, as yesterday. I agree with him: Labour did not build enough housing units, and those of us then on the Back Benches pleaded with the
Government to do so, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey). I welcome the recognition in the Conservative amendment that supply is absolutely crucial. Can I tempt the Minister to go a little further and announce that the Government will abandon the plans that have kept jacking up demand by processes such as Help to Buy, which simply increases prices and increases homelessness?

Gavin Barwell: Until the hon. Gentleman’s last point, I was in complete agreement with him. He is definitely right to say that the main focus of housing policy should be supply, and when he sees the White Paper that the Secretary of State and I are working on, he will see that is the case. However, even if tomorrow we could start building in this country at the level that we need to build, we would have to do that for a number of years before there was an impact on affordability. To do as he suggests in the interim—give up any measures that are trying to help people to bridge the gap—would be a mistake, in my opinion.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab) rose—

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab) rose—

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab) rose—

Gavin Barwell: I shall make progress, and then I will happily take an intervention from the hon. Member for Ashfield.

I want to set out now the measures that the Government are taking to address this issue. First, we want to broaden the safety net and have more focus on prevention rather than cure. Current homelessness legislation gives local authorities responsibilities in relation to families, to people who are pregnant and to single people who are vulnerable. Other people fall through the gaps. The legislation also encourages councils to intervene at the point of crisis, not upstream when problems are first apparent. I am not sure whether my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) is in the Chamber, but I think we would all give him great credit for the legislation that he is bringing forward, and the Government are very proud, in the 50th anniversary year of “Cathy Come Home”, to support that fundamental and important change to our legislation.

Tom Brake rose—

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gavin Barwell: I give way to my hon. Friend, but then I will come back to the hon. Member for Ashfield.

Wendy Morton: Does my hon. Friend agree that on the Friday when both sides of the Chamber came together to support the Homelessness Reduction Bill, the private Member’s Bill introduced by our hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), it was a really positive day, and a good indication that both sides of the House can come, and are coming, together to tackle this issue?

Gavin Barwell: There is actually much more that unites us on these issues than is sometimes apparent from our debates, and I understand that it is the job of those on the Opposition Front Bench to hold the Government to account.

Gloria De Piero: Just one rough sleeper is too many, and there was one rough sleeper in Ashfield in 2010 when we left office. The number has now gone up to eight, and statutory homelessness has risen from 42 to 93. The record of the Labour Government was considerably better for those vulnerable people than the hon. Gentleman’s Government’s. Does he accept responsibility? What is his answer? Why has it happened?

Gavin Barwell: I am the Housing Minister, so of course I accept responsibility. I think I speak for the Secretary of State as well: we were both appointed to these positions by the Prime Minister in July, and our focus is on solving the housing problems that this country faces, which I think are deep-seated. The truth is that we have not been building enough homes in this country for 30 or 40 years, under Governments of both colours, and that is the fundamental driver of the housing problems that we now experience.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the Homelessness Reduction Bill that is passing through the House. I wonder whether he believes, as I do, that the most important thing about that is the fact that it mandates councils to provide 56 days of support to homeless individuals—for the first time, a really intense programme, to ensure that instead of no second night sleeping out, there is no first night sleeping out?

Gavin Barwell: The Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has introduced does two fundamental things. First, it broadens the safety net and ensures that single people do not fall through the gaps. Secondly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) says, it encourages councils to intervene upstream to try to prevent homelessness.

Tom Brake rose—

Joan Ryan rose—

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con) rose—

Gavin Barwell: If hon. Members are happy for me to do so, I will make a bit of progress before taking further interventions. I will come next to my neighbour, the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake).

I have set out the first thing that the Government are doing. Secondly, as the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne acknowledged, we have protected homelessness prevention funding for local authorities—nearly £390 million in this Parliament. Thirdly, we have increased central Government programmes. The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an extra £10 million in the autumn statement, bringing the total to £150 million over this Parliament. Fourthly, in relation to welfare reform, we have increased discretionary housing payments to £870 million over this Parliament; that is a 55% increase.
I was surprised to see when I was briefed for this debate that 60% of local authorities are not currently spending their full allocation.

Fifthly, we are looking at the way in which Government fund local authorities in relation to temporary accommodation. We are looking at replacing the DWP temporary accommodation management fee with a grant from the Department, which will be more than an equivalent amount of funding but will introduce much greater flexibility. Some hon. Members may have received a briefing from the Mayor of London today welcoming that change.

Since the Secretary of State was appointed, we have taken a fresh approach to supported housing, ensuring that the local housing allowance cap will not apply and moving to a new model of funding that is based on current LHA levels but, crucially, topped up by a ring-fenced grant. I think we would all acknowledge the fundamental role that supported housing plays for some of the most vulnerable people in our constituencies. It is absolutely crucial that we get the detail of the new funding regime right, and the ministerial team are determined to ensure that we do so. I encourage all hon. Members to take part in the consultation.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne talked about a pledge that he had made. To a degree, it developed an announcement made by the former Chancellor at Budget ’16 of a £100 million fund to create 2,000 places in low-cost rented accommodation for rough sleepers in hostels and, crucially, for domestic abuse victims in refuges, so that we can move people on from short-term accommodation into permanent solutions. At this point, I happily give way to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington.

Tom Brake: I thank my neighbour for giving way, and I appreciate what he has just said about supporting vulnerable people. He will know, because I made it earlier, that this intervention is about the question of housing benefit for under-21s. I do not quite understand how that fits into the Government’s homelessness prevention programme. Does he recognise that, as charities have suggested, if just 140 extra young people are made homeless as a result of the change, it will cost more than the Government will save?

Gavin Barwell: My right hon. Friend—I can call the right hon. Gentleman that—will be aware, because he served with us in coalition for five years, that what the Government are trying to do is to switch from the high-tax, high-welfare, low-wage economy that we inherited in 2010 to one in which people are paid more and keep a much greater proportion of what they earn.

Graham Jones rose—

Gavin Barwell: To be fair, I am still trying to answer the right hon. Gentleman’s question. We are trying to reduce the welfare bill, and to ensure that we have a fair welfare system that provides help and support to people but does not treat them more generously than others in an equivalent position who are not on welfare could expect to be treated. That is what is behind those changes. I will make a bit of progress, and then I will happily come back to the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones).

I have been working my way through the list of measures that the Government are taking, and next up is our attempt to deal with the up-front cost of accessing the private rented sector. One shocking thing, which underlines the point that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) made, is the fact that the main cause of statutory homelessness is the loss of a private rented sector tenancy. That shows how the supply issue is absolutely driving the rise in statutory homelessness. Rough sleeping is a different matter, and the acute housing problem faced by people who are sleeping on our streets is nearly always a symptom of a wider problem in terms of mental health or drug or alcohol addiction. Indeed, the briefing that I had from my officials suggested that in London, nearly 60% of rough sleepers are not UK nationals, so issues in our migration system contribute to that. In terms of dealing with statutory homelessness, access to the private rented sector is key. That is why the Chancellor’s announcement in the autumn statement about letting agent fees—I am sure the Opposition welcome that announcement—is an important step.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab) rose—

Gavin Barwell: I was going to give way to the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), but she has moved seats. I will give way to the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) instead.

Dr Huq: The Minister is a London MP, like me, and he has mentioned London. Has he in his surgeries found an increasing number of cases of entire families having to be moved to hostels with no recourse to public funds, which is entirely illogical? Does he not recognise the dismay there will be in Ealing about the mention of the borough in Prime Minister’s questions today? The Prime Minister appeared to blame the local authority for the £180 million cut to its budget. We have 12,000 people on our waiting list, and the cost of buying a home is very high, so does he not recognise that people will be dismayed about what has come out of the Government today?

Gavin Barwell: I am embarrassed to say that I was not present for Prime Minister’s questions. There was a memorial service for the victims of the Croydon tram crash, which is why I am addressed in this way, and that is where I was. I therefore cannot respond to the hon. Lady’s point about PMQs. However, I can say that, as a London MP, I see every week in my surgeries and in my case load the consequences of the long-standing failure in this country, for 30 or 40 years, to build the homes we need. That has happened under Governments of all kinds—

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab) rose—

Gavin Barwell: Let me just finish making this point. London is the part of the country where the gap between what we need to build and what we are actually building is at its most acute. I am sure that I am also speaking for the Secretary of State when I say that I get up every morning thinking about what we can do to sort out this problem. It is my sole focus, and I will come on in a moment to address the issue of supply.
Before I do so, I am very happy to give way to the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), who is another fine south London MP.

Heidi Alexander: I find it absolutely remarkable that the Minister is trying to absolve the previous Government of any responsibility for the housing crisis that we now face. My recollection is that, in 2011, his Government cut the national affordable house building programme by 63%. Will he set out the consequences of that on the supply of genuinely affordable homes?

Gavin Barwell: If the hon. Lady will bear with me, I will return to that central question at the end of my speech.

Graham Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Gavin Barwell: I am still responding to the hon. Lady. I cannot make myself any clearer, but if she thinks that I am absolving the previous Government of responsibility, I am absolutely not trying to do so. Let me say it one more time, so that nobody can be in any doubt about this: we have not built enough homes in this country for 30 or 40 years, and all the Governments covering the period share responsibility for that. If she wants me to offer some defences, I would say in defence of the previous Prime Minister, the previous Chancellor and my predecessors as Housing Ministers that they inherited a situation, after the worst economic crash in generations, in which the priority had to be to reduce the deficit. I will come on to the affordable housing numbers, and I hope my answer will satisfy the hon. Lady.

Several hon. Members rose—

Gavin Barwell: I will give way one more time, and I must then draw my remarks to a close.

Julian Knight rose—

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend has already intervened, so I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter).

Dr Poulter: I thought the Minister was ignoring me, but I am sure he was not doing so. I commend his positive and constructive approach to this debate; indeed, the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman also took such an approach. The Minister has mentioned rough sleeping and the need to move from crisis to preventive measures. In that connection, will he reflect on the fragmentation of the alcohol and drug rehabilitation services commissioned by local authorities and on the fact that those services are completely disengaged from what is happening in mental health trusts and the NHS, with people falling between the cracks? That needs to be addressed.

Gavin Barwell: I am very glad that I took an intervention from my hon. Friend, because he speaks with real authority on mental health issues. He is absolutely right that we need to look at ways in which we can achieve better integration of services. Many of the people we are talking about have profound and multiple needs, and we must ensure that all the relevant agencies are working together.

If the House will bear with me—I know many hon. Members wish to speak in the debate—I just want to make some final remarks to address the question asked by the hon. Member for Lewisham East. The fundamental thing we need to do is to drive up supply, and we will set out in a White Paper in the new year exactly how we propose to do that. Let me say a word specifically about affordable housing, on which the hon. Lady was pushing me. The autumn statement included three key announcements, one of which was about the flexibility of tenure. We inherited an affordable housing programme focused solely on shared ownership, but we have switched it so that housing associations can bid for affordable rent, rent to buy, shared ownership or whatever is most appropriate in their areas. The Chancellor has added an extra £1.4 billion to the affordable housing programme. As I made clear in an intervention on the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne, we have also announced the London allocation of £3.5 billion, which is 43% of the national budget. As I said, if hon. Members do not wish to take my word for it, let me quote the Labour Mayor of London:

“...This is the largest sum of money ever secured by City Hall to deliver affordable housing.”

He made that statement before London has got its share of the extra £1.4 billion that the Chancellor announced in the autumn statement.

Let me end by dealing with the issue of affordable housing supply. The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne was right on one statistic at least: the 2015-16 figures on affordable housing were very low—unacceptably low. That was because we finished one programme the previous year and the new programme was late starting. That is a feeble excuse, and the Secretary of State and I are determined to ensure it does not happen again.

To set out the facts, in three of the five years of the coalition Government, we built more affordable homes than in any of the last nine years of the Labour Government. The record of the Government since 2010—I am very happy to give some credit to our coalition partners—is that we have delivered significantly more affordable housing than was delivered, on average, over the last nine years of the Labour Government. I do not have the figures for before 2001. We have just put extra money into the budget, so we should be able to drive up supply.

I will end by making this point.

John Healey: Will the Minister give way?

Gavin Barwell: No, I am drawing my remarks to a close.

What we need in this country—the hon. Member for Lewisham East was quite right—is more homes of every single kind. We need more homes for people to buy, more homes for private rent, more affordable homes at sub-market rents and more shared ownership homes. We need more homes of every single kind. We are determined to achieve that and, at the same time, to provide the crucial support on our streets to deal with the immediate
acute crisis. To end on a positive note, I hope we can build a coalition around the vital change we need in our country to get us building the homes we so desperately need.

4.46 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate about homelessness and I thank the Labour party for bringing it to the House. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) on his contribution. It is a pleasure to follow my parliamentary football colleague, the Minister. The thoughts of all those on the SNP Benches are with the families of the victims of the Croydon tram crash on the day of the memorial service.

Although we would prefer it if the motion focused more on the causes of homelessness, including the brutal benefit sanctions regime and the years of imposed austerity, we will support it tonight in solidarity, as we believe that action must be taken by the UK Government to drive down homelessness. That must include moving urgently to address the regressive cuts to the system that is supposed to support, not punish, the disadvantaged.

Before I begin, I wish to highlight one aspect of the Labour motion that is particularly troubling for me and for others across the House: the prospect of children being without safe, warm and secure housing at any time, but particularly at Christmas. Before we retreat into our party political trenches, I hope we can all agree that that is unacceptable and must be addressed. In Scotland, the number of children living in temporary accommodation has fallen since 2007.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman said that the Government should be doing more to reduce homelessness. Does he accept that we are working on a cross-party basis to reduce homelessness at the Committee stage of the Homelessness Reduction Bill, which is supported by the Government?

Neil Gray: Absolutely, I acknowledge that. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) sits on the Bill Committee, so it is something that we are working on constructively. I will come on to other areas where I believe the Government should be doing more to address the issues we face.

Housing matters are devolved to each nation of the UK, so this debate offers me the chance to focus on what actions the Scottish Government have taken, using those powers, to address the problem of homelessness when it arises and to prevent it from occurring in the first place. Although housing policy is devolved, the key difference in the approach to homelessness prevention in Scotland from that in the other three nations of the UK is that local authorities have a duty towards all unintentionally homeless households, irrespective of whether they are classed as being a priority need. Clearly, for any individual or family, regardless of any other criteria, the prospect of losing the roof over their head means they should be entitled to all possible support in finding alternative accommodation. The abolition of the priority need criterion was described by Shelter as providing “the best homelessness law in Europe.”

According to figures from Crisis from April 2016, homelessness in Scotland has been on a marked downward path” for the past five years. Crisis has attributed that decline to the introduction of the housing options model, a process in Scotland that starts with giving housing advice to someone with a housing problem who approaches their local authority, to look at an individual’s options, given their circumstances, so as to match things up best and spot any warning signs for potential problems at an early stage.

In that regard, the most significant action has been the abolition of the right-to-buy scheme in Scotland. Graeme Brown, director of Shelter Scotland, argues that “as the decades passed, it became clear that the impact of right-to-buy was to create more losers than winners in our housing system, significantly undermining wider efforts to improve social justice in Scotland...The initiative saw three social homes being sold for every new one built, representing poor value for increasingly limited public money...During the right-to-buy era, homelessness numbers soared and today still remain at levels far beyond those in 1980.”

By abolishing the right to buy the Scottish Government will help to ensure that there is a sufficient supply of local authority housing stock, at an affordable rent and with secure tenancies, to help alleviate some of the causes of potential homelessness that come with expensive private rents and the uncertainty about the long term that short-term tenancies can bring.

The Scottish National party is already committed to investing more than £3 billion over the lifetime of this Parliament to deliver at least 50,000 affordable homes, with 35,000 for social rent. Housing supply is key to the matter before us today, which is why I am heartened by the statistics released as national statistics for Scotland this week showing that social house building is up in Scotland by 77% in April to June this year, with a 26% increase in starts on council homes to September.

As well as dealing with the right to buy, the SNP Government have attempted to address another factor behind homelessness by using their limited powers to mitigate the impact of the Tory bedroom tax. Numerous homelessness charities, including Crisis and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, have said that that hated policy is partly responsible for the rise in homelessness across
the UK since the start of this decade. The UK Government’s own research from December 2015 found that on average only 0.5% of those affected by the bedroom tax have been able to move from their home; the vast majority of those affected by the cut have had to live with a reduced income, unable to move because of family proximity, school, work and the shortage of appropriate housing.

Last year the Scottish Government provided an additional £35 million fully to mitigate the cost of the bedroom tax, with £90 million invested in that mitigation since 2013. Around 72,000 households in Scotland have been helped through this additional funding, with about 80% of recipients being disabled adults and about 11,000 of them being households with one or more children. Abolishing the bedroom tax in full will be one of the first priorities once the transfer of limited social security powers to the Scottish Government is completed.

The recent debate on the state of the social security system, particularly as it affects those unfit for work, provoked by Ken Loach’s film, “I, Daniel Blake”, casts our minds back to his earlier televised play, “Cathy Come Home”, which the Minister mentioned, and which, in a similar social realist way, helped to highlight the problem of homelessness in 1960s Britain. There is clearly a connection between these two works. Both highlight the importance of a strong social security system to helping avoid such problems, and both illustrate what happens when a Government’s approach to an issue fails fully to take into account people’s individual circumstances.

The private Member’s Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on 2 December, which the SNP supported, sought to do just that by establishing a sanctions review system whereby an individual’s circumstances would be taken into account before a sanction decision could be made. Such a review would include considering whether someone is at risk of homelessness and would go some way to personalising the sanctions system, although we would obviously prefer that it be scrapped altogether.

The Tory Government’s sanctions regime has had many catastrophic consequences for families across the UK, and clearly the increase in homelessness must be considered among the most serious. The regime has left individuals and families, often already vulnerable, without money for weeks on end, at a time when they are often being hounded by predators, such as payday loan companies, and can often lead to rent arrears and spiralling debt that can create a downward spiral leading to eviction.

In December 2015, research for the homelessness charity Crisis carried out by Sheffield Hallam University found that 21% of people sanctioned in the last year had become homeless as a result and that 16% of those sanctioned had been forced to sleep rough. Only last month, in response to the National Audit Office report that suggested there was no evidence that sanctions worked, Mr Jon Sparkes, chief executive of Crisis, said:

“We know from our own research that benefit sanctions are a cause of homelessness and have a significant impact on vulnerable people – including those who are already homeless, care leavers and people with mental ill health”.

For anyone in such a position, losing the support of benefits can be disastrous and make it even harder to find work.

The SNP is clear about the damage caused by UK social security cuts and will keep working with stakeholders to understand the impact of the UK Government’s planned local housing allowance changes on social tenants in Scotland. The proposed capping will lock those who need support out of either seeking it or being able to afford it.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): On the point about sanctions for those with mental health issues and homeless people, does the hon. Gentleman welcome the recent announcement by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions of a discretionary fund to help support them when they are at their most vulnerable?

Neil Gray: Yes, but it is clearly an acknowledgement that the system has not worked for these people. With respect, any move to get rid of the sanctions regime is obviously welcome, but far more needs to be done.

The gap between the LHA paid and the price of supported housing could see many at-risk individuals not receive the support they need from a residential tenancy. A sample study carried out by the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations found that associations in Scotland that provided supported accommodation could lose between £5.2 million and £14.3 million per year. From 2019, the resources for supported accommodation will transfer to the Scottish Government. We are left with great concern about the LHA levels.

The Scottish Government have said that, once they have further details, they will work with their partners to ensure that supported accommodation is put on a secure and sustainable future for the longer term. With the cost of living set to rise, damming forecasts for the UK economy and little cheer in the autumn statement for low-income families, as we heard in the previous debate, it is important that the UK Government realise the damaging impact that austerity is having up and down the country in a variety of ways. This debate has helped to highlight this damage in the crucial area of homelessness. The UK Government should have little to ponder when they consider the growing emergence of people just about managing.

In the time left, I wish to touch briefly on a more general discussion about homelessness, looking at things from the individual’s point of view and understanding both the underlying causes and consequences of homelessness, which can be harder to quantify and address.

Crisis has carried out numerous pieces of important research on the causes and consequences, which have uncovered some particularly depressing statistics. On average, homeless people die at 47 years old, 30 years before the national average of 77. However, poor physical or mental health, along with dependency issues, are problems for the entire homeless population, whether they are sleeping rough on the streets, in hostels or in temporary accommodation.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case, but just to correct that point, it is rough sleepers who are likely to die at the age of 46, which is a tragedy in this day and age. The figures that he is probably looking at relate to the problems of so-called sofa surfers, who are those sleeping...
with friends or family or anywhere else they can find. The figures for those people, although they are homeless, are not as bad. We need to narrow the focus on to the problems faced by rough sleepers on the streets.

Neil Gray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am happy to confirm that, as I have said, homeless people die at 47 years old, and there are issues with life chances whether people are rough sleeping or living in temporary accommodation of varying standards. I think that is a point he will agree with—he is nodding.

Physical disabilities, mental ill health or dependency issues can also trigger, or be part of, a chain of events that lead to someone becoming homeless. Such problems can make it more difficult for people to engage with services and get the help and support they need. Too often services are not set up to respond to the particular, individualised needs of homeless people. Two thirds of homeless people cite drug or alcohol use as a reason for first becoming homeless and those who use drugs are seven times more likely to be homeless than the general population. There are high levels of stress and mental illness associated with being homeless, and it is not uncommon for those traumatised by homelessness to seek solace in drug or alcohol abuse thereafter. Indeed, 27% of homeless people surveyed reported having or recovering from an alcohol problem and 39% reported taking drugs or are recovering from a drug problem.

Although a small percentage of those classed as homeless are sleeping rough on the streets—it is all too high a percentage nevertheless—it is worth remembering the challenges and problems that such a dreadful situation brings and what needs to be done to address it. The 2011 report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, “Tackling homelessness and exclusion: Understanding complex lives”, helped to highlight “extreme forms of homelessness and other support needs,”

and the “nearly half of service users reporting experience of institutional care, substance misuse, and street activities (such as begging), as well as homelessness.”

In conclusion, the additional challenges and underlying issues mean that while everything must be done by both the Scottish and UK Governments to ensure that a strong safety net is in place for those facing the prospect of homelessness and measures to deal with it, as a society we must also understand and seek to address the underlying causes and consequences that some of those caught up in this horrendous situation face, by ensuring that all individuals can access support from the agencies best placed to assist them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. On account of the number of would-be contributors to this debate, I am afraid there will have to be a five-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches with immediate effect, but we will do our best to accommodate everybody.

5.3 pm

David Mackintosh (Northampton South) (Con): I welcome this debate brought forward by the Opposition. I have always said that one person who is homeless is one too many, so every opportunity we have to highlight this problem of modern society is helpful.

As we approach Christmas, I know that all those taking part in this debate will be particularly mindful of the human stories behind the statistics. I have one story at the forefront of my mind. On 31 October, I took part in a sleep-out organised by the charity Depaul at Lord’s cricket ground. I left here after the late-night Monday votes and slept rough for the night. It gives us some insight into the horrible realities, but I knew that it was for only one night and that I would be back in a warm bed the next night.

After sleeping rough, I was a little tired and jaded, but I was back here the following day, and my first job was to speak at a conference on homelessness at a hotel just over Westminster bridge. As I walked over with my assistant, we both saw that a homeless person was on the street, and it was clear to us that they had sadly passed away. I do not know the name of that person, who they were or where they came from, but I know that while I was sleeping rough just a few miles away, this homeless person had been out in the cold and the wet, and died in the sight of Parliament and in earshot of Big Ben. My assistant and I were horrified to witness that visible example of the plight of homeless people on our streets, and in recent weeks, I have read about other cases in other cities.

I do not profess to have all the answers to solve this social problem, but I do know that we should not let these people die in vain. For their memory’s sake, we should continue to do all we can to prevent people from becoming homeless and to address the many complex causes and challenges that lead to people becoming homeless in the first place.

We should also recognise the work that we have collectively already done. As has been mentioned, on 28 October hon. Members agreed the Second Reading of the Homelessness Reduction Bill, a private Member’s Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). We all know how important Fridays are for our constituency work, but to see over 150 MPs here on that day was proof that the issues are being taken seriously by all Members. The Government’s support for that Bill is part of a package of measures, which I welcome. I am pleased to serve with other hon. Members of all parties on the Public Bill Committee. The Bill is being looked at in great detail, with cross-party support and a positive approach to improving things.

The Bill will ensure that councils can help even more people and will introduce a duty on local housing authorities to take reasonable steps to help anyone at risk of homelessness to retain or secure accommodation 56 days before they become homeless. It will require councils to take reasonable steps to provide support to any eligible people who find themselves homeless for a further period of 56 days, to help them secure accommodation.

I am pleased that the Government have, alongside supporting the Bill, announced a number of other measures and funding to help address homelessness and its causes. They are providing £500 million to prevent and reduce homelessness over this Parliament, as well as introducing a number of other schemes.

The Department for Work and Pensions temporary accommodation management fee is being replaced with a new Department for Communities and Local Government grant. That means that current levels of funding will be protected, but that an additional £10 million of funding
will be introduced for areas with the highest pressures. The new grant will give local authorities more flexibility in managing homelessness pressures.

Central Government funding of £149 million will target prevention and reduction programmes in different ways. The £20 million Trailblazer programme, for example, will enable councils to work together with other agencies to prevent homelessness in their area, while the £20 million rough sleeping fund will help those at imminent risk of homelessness or those new to the streets, and the £10 million social impact bond will help rough sleepers with complex needs. In addition, a total of £100 million will help provide 2,000 places in low-cost rented accommodation to help people move on from hostels and domestic abuse refuges towards independent living. Young people are particularly vulnerable, and it is important that they are supported into education and employment. The £40 million of funding for the Homelessness Change and Platform for Life programmes will support young people to improve their lives.

I am pleased that the Homelessness Reduction Bill will give local authorities new responsibility and new funding, but despite the challenges, I am pleased that local authorities have helped to prevent more than 1 million people from becoming homeless since 2010. I recognise that there is more work to be done and that debates such as today’s help us to keep the issue at the forefront of all our minds. We know, however, that homelessness is often not the result of one factor alone, because it is a complex issue. I am pleased that we are talking about it today.

5.8 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I congratulate the Opposition Front-Bench team on their continued focus on the issue of homelessness and on the initiative to tackle rough sleeping. Speaking as an MP representing the borough of Westminster, nobody could welcome that more than me. Westminster City Council is, of course, at the forefront of the national crisis in rough sleeping. The council’s draft rough sleeping strategy, which is currently under consideration, shows that 3,000 people sleep rough over the course of a year—300 on any given night—and reminds us of the many complex causes and drivers that have led to the recent rise in homelessness. Colleagues have mentioned some of those factors, but one particular figure jumped out at me as an example of how the Government could learn about the importance of interconnecting services and the role that other Departments’ actions play: a third of rough sleepers in Westminster—32%—have been in prison. It is absolutely extraordinary that we are incapable of preventing people who have come out of prison from ending up on the streets. One in four rough sleepers in Westminster has been assessed as being at a high risk of reoffending, so it is clearly in our public interest to ensure that the crisis does not continue.

Rough sleeping is only the tip of the iceberg, however, and I want to spend a couple of minutes on the issues that were brought out by the “Temporary Accommodation in London” report by Julie Rugg of the University of York. It tells us about the drivers of family homelessness in London and points out that one in 10 Londoners are on a social housing waiting list and that homelessness acceptances have risen by 77% since 2010. Why is that? We have already talked about supply, repeating the figures and comparing records, so I do not want to do that again, but the Government must properly understand affordability. Even if supply grows—welcome though that will be—if accommodation is unaffordable for people at the lower end of the income spectrum, that will not solve homelessness and the Homelessness Reduction Bill, which we are coalescing around and want to see succeed, will be swimming against the tide.

The Rugg report also helps us to understand that the cuts to social security benefits and the local housing allowance, the benefit cap and other policies are driving homelessness, making it impossible for people on lower incomes to afford accommodation and causing landlords to withdraw from letting private rented accommodation to people on low incomes. According to the Residential Landlords Association, a staggering 81% of landlords are unwilling to consider homeless people on housing benefit because of the threat to their income from universal credit. In inner London, only 7% or 9% of accommodation—I do not have the figure in front of me, but the proportion is ridiculously small—is available to people on lower incomes. When the Welfare Reform Act 2012 went through Parliament, we were told that rents would fall as cuts to housing benefit were applied, but the opposite has happened: rents in London went up by 32% in outer London and 39% in inner London. That is a cause of homelessness, and the situation will get worse unless we do something about it.

The problem is not only leading to individual homelessness but costing local authorities money. London local authorities alone have spent £665 million on homelessness. Discretionary housing payments are always put forward by the Government as the solution to all the problems, but they are not, because they are temporary by definition. Until the Government understand that local authorities will not use discretionary housing payments to solve the crisis because of their temporary nature, we will end up repeating the problems.

Unfortunately, I do not have much time to talk about temporary accommodation and the fact that the squeeze on local authorities is leading to families spending this Christmas in appalling conditions. In particular, I ask the Minister to help me deal with A2Dominion, a housing association that is leaving many residents without heating in damp and mouldy accommodation. Children and families should not be spending Christmas homeless on the street, in bed and breakfasts or in nightly booked and insecure temporary accommodation. They are doing so in record numbers, and the Government must act not only through the Department for Communities and Local Government, but by co-ordinating with all the other Departments that contribute to the problem through their actions.

5.13 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). I entirely agree with her that nobody likes to think of anybody sleeping rough at this time of year or over Christmas. Rough sleeping is the most visible element of homelessness, but she rightly pointed out that we must not forget those who are sofa-surfing or in temporary accommodation up and down the country.
I have been impressed by the tone of the debate so far, and it is important to note that no one party has a monopoly on compassion. Let me be absolutely clear: no Member of the House wants to see anybody sleeping rough on our streets or not having a home.

In order to tackle homelessness, we need to get to the bottom of it and understand it. That is not about attributing blame; it is about understanding the complex issues and circumstances that lead to homelessness. Fifty years on from the gritty BBC drama “Cathy Come Home”, where we saw life events such as homelessness, family breakdown and Cathy losing her children, how can we have people sleeping rough on our streets in the fifth largest economy in the world? “Cathy Come Home” brought homelessness to the attention of the public via their TVs and gave the issue nationwide awareness, but 50 years on, have we forgotten? Do we see the people sleeping on cardboard on our streets when we walk past? Do we really stop to think as we dismiss another homeless person who asks us for the change in our pockets? Do we judge those we see shooting up or drinking high-strength lager in doorways? Are they someone else’s problem? Is this the result of their bad life choices? Is it really nothing to do with us?

Hon. Members should not think for a minute that I am being holier-than-thou, sanctimonious or in some way patronising, because I openly admit that I have done it, too; sometimes it is easier to walk on, close our eyes and pretend that we do not see the great stain on our humanity that is rough sleeping and the fact that in this relatively wealthy country, people are sleeping on our streets in sub-zero temperatures, open to the elements and to assault, abuse, violence and sexual assault.

We hear that we have actually gone much further than just closing our eyes and that councils up and down the country, of all political colours, are financing homeless people just for being homeless, that we are confiscating their sleeping bags and bedding, and that there are companies in this city erecting anti-rough-sleeping spikes in doorways. Have we lost our humanity? I am pleased to say that I do not think we have, because charities and voluntary groups up and down the country, including several in my constituency, work tirelessly, night and day, running soup kitchens, shelters and other facilities.

I had a recent experience when a lady approached me while I was waiting for the 91 bus opposite Charing Cross station. I thought she wanted money, but she did not, and we talked for 10 or so minutes. She asked whether she could have a hug, and I said, “Of course.” I was a little bemused and taken aback, but what she was really saying was, “Thank you for treating me like a human being. Thank you for not just stopping and ignoring me.” She never asked for money; at that point in time she was just a woman down on her luck, feeling isolated and forgotten by society, reaching out in the hope that someone would see her and listen to her plight.

As I said, the issues we are dealing with are numerous and complex. I am very proud to serve on the all-party group for ending homelessness and on the Homelessness Reduction Bill Committee, along with my hon. Friend Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): On 29 November, a young man froze to death in John Bright Street in central Birmingham. Sadly, there is worse to come in Birmingham. If the Government go ahead with the biggest cuts to any council in local government history, particularly cuts to supported housing, it will mean—in the words of Alan Fraser, the chief executive of the YMCA—that “more will die”. Mark Rogers, chief executive of Birmingham City Council said that there will be “catastrophic consequences”.

I was born under Clement Attlee and I grew up under Harold Macmillan. It was an era in which a Conservative Government, following in the footsteps of a Labour Government, built homes on a grand scale—homes fit for heroes. I never thought that, in my lifetime, we would see programmes such as “Cathy Come Home”—that happened in the 1960s—and the office block speculation that happened in London in the 1970s, when homelessness was rapidly rising. I am proud to say that I was one of those who occupied Centrepoint in opposition to what was going on.

People on both sides of this House have been passionate about the cause of homelessness over many years. I have to say that I am proud of what Labour did in government, even if we did not go far enough. I am that councils will have to give consistent advice and no longer advise tenants to stay put until the bailiffs arrive.

David Mackintosh: Does my hon. Friend agree that section 21 notices are often the cause of people becoming homeless?

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; we know that the largest cause of homelessness is the ending of a tenancy, largely via a section 21 notice. The system whereby an individual comes to their council for assistance at the earliest possible opportunity when they get into trouble, and the council turns them away and says, “Come back when the bailiffs are knocking on your door”—at which point the person has arrears and a county court judgment against their name, and will never again be able to rent in the private rented sector—is failing those individuals, and it has to stop. The Government have already taken a large number of steps to tackle homelessness, and I will not repeat them, as my hon. Friend made them clear. Are they enough? Clearly they are not, as there is always more that we can do.

I am conscious that I have less than a minute left to speak, so I just want to touch on the private rented sector. I have mentioned that it is part of the problem, and we need to examine security of tenure and rent deposit schemes. We have a scheme for mortgages, via Help to Buy, and we should consider a help to rent scheme or a help to rent ISA. We need to work with the Council of Mortgage Lenders and insurers to lift the restriction on buy-to-let property owners offering assured shorthold tenancies of more than a year.

I am conscious that my time is up, but I will end by saying that prevention is absolutely key and that providing assistance at the first available opportunity is so, so important. The Bill is a step in the right direction, but there is still much more to do.

5.19 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): On 29 November, a young man froze to death in John Bright Street in central Birmingham. Sadly, there is worse to come in Birmingham. If the Government go ahead with the biggest cuts to any council in local government history, particularly cuts to supported housing, it will mean—in the words of Alan Fraser, the chief executive of the YMCA—that “more will die”. Mark Rogers, chief executive of Birmingham City Council said that there will be “catastrophic consequences”.

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People on both sides of this House have been passionate about the cause of homelessness over many years. I have to say that I am proud of what Labour did in government, even if we did not go far enough. I am
proud of the fact that we built 2 million more houses, that we created 1 million more homeowners, that we improved 1.8 million social homes and brought them up to a decent homes standard and that we cut rough sleeping by three quarters. It was a generation of progress.

When the coalition Government took power in 2010, they should have invested in a major house building programme, but, in a bid to get the economy moving, we saw exactly the reverse: home ownership falling; social housing in crisis with 140,000 fewer homes; a rapidly growing private rented sector, characterised by soaring rents, with the average tenant paying £2,000 more over the past five years; insecurity; and often poor accommodation. All those things have contributed towards growing homelessness and the doubling of rough sleeping.

Mr Speaker, you were good enough to preside over the opening session of the first ever homeless young people’s parliament in Parliament in 2012. It was a deeply moving occasion, and it challenged the caricature that, somehow, all young homeless people are druggies, drunks and drop-outs. Many of them were quintessentially middle England and middle Scotland. Their lives had fallen apart because their families had broken up. What came out of that parliament was: hear our voice; more affordable homes; and do not cut desperately needed benefit for young people.

After the young man died in Birmingham, the Secretary of State said that it was wrong and that we should do more. The problem is that the Government are doing less. Coming back to the city of Birmingham, which I am proud to represent, £800 million has been cut from its budget. Fourteen charities wrote only yesterday to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government saying that, thus far, the council has been able to protect the supported housing budget, but it will not be able to continue to do so. The consequences will be serious. There will be the same risk of another young man or young woman dying a terrible, cold death on the streets of the city.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that prevention is the key? The UK Government could look to the Welsh Labour Government, who in their Housing (Wales) Act 2014 have pledged £5.6 million in the first year and £3 million in the second year, despite cuts from the UK Government, to fund affordable rent as well as affordable homes to buy. They also pledged not to force local authorities to sell vacant properties to the highest bidder.

Jack Dromey: The costs of homelessness, in both financial and human terms, are infinitely greater than investing in preventing homelessness in the first place. My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I applaud the Administration in Wales for what they have done.

It is too late, as Christmas looms, to bring back that young man. It is too late, sadly, to avoid what my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) referred to as the tragedy of 120,000 children waking up on Christmas day in temporary accommodation, much of it inferior and cramped. They are looking forward to going home after school and celebrating the day, only to be in temporary accommodation. It is too late, but the Government can do more, beginning, crucially, with the announcement tomorrow of the communities and local government settlement for the great city of Birmingham.

The next stage—the Opposition will certainly champion this—is to develop the great national will to build the homes that our country needs; to create the jobs needed to build homes; and to provide security and warmth, and all those things that matter to us and to the people we represent. Never again should someone like that young man die, but the Government have to act and do more.

5.26 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Penzance in my constituency is often referred to as being at the end of the line. Despite the beauty and charm that attracts people when they choose a holiday destination, we are not spared the challenges, not least the difficulties experienced by many people and that result in their sleeping rough. In fact, we are often described as the end of the line because that is exactly what happens: people get on the train and stay on it until they reach Penzance, and then they sleep rough and are homeless in my beautiful part of the world, which has, however, a lot of hidden poverty.

In a civilised society, it is not right that some people have no choice but to sleep rough. The challenge is much greater than providing a roof over someone’s head. In recent months, I have taken a close look at the homelessness and rough sleeping issues in Penzance and other towns in my constituency. I have looked at the issues facing rough sleepers, and I have spoken to the police and to rough sleepers themselves. I spent a couple of days in the recent recess going out early in the morning and talking to them to find out what their problems were and how they reached that point. I have also spoken to charities and Church groups that provide support—an incredible number of resources and services are available for people in far-west Cornwall—as well as housing providers.

There are many reasons why people become homeless. Some of them struggle to adjust when their jobs change. I met a fisherman who, once he had finished fishing, could not settle into what we would describe as normal life. There are many foreign nationals in our part of the world. We have a lot of transient workers and people who work on part-time contracts for farmers. At the end of the season, they often do not have anywhere to go and they find themselves living rough.

As has been said, former prisoners are often homeless. I met a former prisoner who could not find the help that he needed to re-establish his life and rehabilitate himself. Because we are at the end of the line, highly skilled and well-paid people who want a change of lifestyle come to Cornwall to find one, but it does not go right, their money disappears and they have nowhere to go. All their bridges are burnt.

Another cause of rough sleeping and homelessness, as has been discussed, is family break-up. Many families break up, and young people and even partners have to find somewhere to live, but there is nothing available for them. They are at a stage in life where they did not expect that to happen.

Sometimes a debt-fuelled life hits crisis point. I have met people who were just about managing, but an accident or something else happened in the family and
they suddenly experienced a loss of earnings and everything went downhill very quickly. Domestic violence, drug and alcohol dependency and mental health problems can also be a trigger. People get to the point where they cannot cope: they try to keep everything together, but they cannot manage household bills and so on.

In west Cornwall, we have a problem with a low-wage economy and high living costs. Council tax band C is £138 a month, for example, which is 9% of earnings for a full-time worker on £10 an hour. We are living in an environment where people can become homeless very quickly because of the sheer cost of living.

More homes are needed, I agree, but we must also support people—for example, with the skills they need. We must provide help to support couples and families. We need to reduce drug and alcohol dependency, provide adequate mental health services, drive up earnings and reduce the burden of tax on low earners. The greater challenge is to support people to be independent and to live full lives. If we fail in this, we will never genuinely address the nation’s homelessness problems. I would like to hear from the Minister today more detail about how the Government intend to prevent homelessness and use the money that they are setting aside to support the organisations and charities that can help so many people live the lives that they deserve.

5.30 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Since I was first elected last year, the largest part of my casework has involved housing and homelessness issues. Let me share two cases with the House.

A 28-year-old contacted me, having been homeless for nine years. A lack of help meant that he fell into a life of crime, substance misuse and rough sleeping. Last Christmas, he was attacked and had to have a metal plate in his jaw. This is not the life he wants to live. He wants to make changes and he does not want to be constantly scared.

A mother of an eight-week-old baby contacted me after she was placed in temporary accommodation, two hours away from her local community. She does not know a single person. The accommodation is filthy. It is unhygienic, so she is worried about breastfeeding her baby. The first few months of a child’s life are crucial. She is scared, lonely and disconnected from her support network in south London. These are just two examples of the hundreds and hundreds of cases that I receive.

A homelessness charity in my constituency, Deptford 999 Club, which sees around 50 people in a single day, tells me that it has seen a rise in the number of young vulnerable adults in its winter night shelters. One 23-year-old who was brought up in care was made homeless after a breakdown with his adoptive family. He was sofa-surfing until he ran out of places to stay. He then began sleeping rough. However, Deptford 999 Club managed to house him locally and he now attends university. Thankfully, this is a success story, but, sadly, it is a rarity. Too many people are having to rely on the goodwill of such charities. We should be doing more.

Deptford 999 Club has had some of its vital resources decommissioned because of the lack of council funding currently available. Fierce cuts in local authority budgets mean that it is forced into making decisions that have detrimental knock-on effects. It is these knock-on effects that have led to the present situation. Lewisham council’s budget has been cut by £121 million since 2010, and funding will be cut again by a quarter by 2020. These cuts are creating holes in our services and simply cost us more in the long term. The number of households in temporary accommodation has gone up by 91% since 2010, yet the supply of affordable lets has decreased by 40% since 2010. These numbers just don’t add up. How on earth are local authorities expected to help those people?

I have looked through the Homelessness Reduction Bill, which I welcome, but I have some concerns about how it will deliver and how local authorities can fund the duties that they will have. They will be required to carry out an assessment of what led to each applicant’s homelessness, but without additional money. Local authorities will be required to secure accommodation for all eligible households threatened with homelessness—again, no additional money.

Bob Blackman: The hon. Lady is making a powerful case for her area. Does she not understand that under the new burdens doctrine, because those measures are in the Bill, the Government have to provide funding for those services?

Vicky Foxcroft: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. If the Government were providing that funding, we would welcome it, but we have seen no evidence of that. They are giving councils additional things to do, but not providing extra funding. They are just ring-fencing funding in different areas.

Local authorities will be required to provide those who find themselves homeless with support for a further 56 days to help them secure accommodation, and that—I am going to say it again—is without additional funding. While these things all sound good in principle, I have to ask again how on earth they will be possible when the Government are not properly resourcing local authorities to deliver them.

As we sit here and debate this issue, there are thousands of people across Britain with no roof over their heads, no place to call home, no shelter and no warmth. Rough sleeping has doubled since 2010. Homelessness is up by a third. Things have to change if we want to reverse this trend. We need more affordable housing. We need to tackle spiralling high-cost rents. We need to ensure that local authorities are given the funding they need to be able to tackle these issues.

5.35 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): When we discuss homelessness in this place, we should always keep it in mind that there but for the grace of God go I. Like people in the country at large, we all have different circumstances, but I wonder just how little would need to go wrong for us to find ourselves in dire straits—perhaps just a missed rent or mortgage payment, especially if we do not have family or friends to take us in.

Homelessness can come very suddenly and for a number of reasons, but homelessness and rough sleeping should not be allowed to rob individuals of their individuality or their hopes and dreams. We do not want people to fall out of society. Homelessness is about more than
simply the availability of houses. That is why the Homelessness Reduction Bill and the Children and Social Work Bill are such good news, and I will return to those later.

There is, though, good work being done already. In my area, Portsmouth City Council has received 1,068 homeless presentations in the last year. Of these, 527 were accepted. In 110 cases, homelessness was prevented, and in 183 cases, advice and assistance alone were sufficient for the applicant. Once it has accepted a family, Portsmouth has a strong record of finding permanent, secure accommodation. Three months in temporary accommodation is an average wait for a family, with some housed much sooner. This is very positive, but there are undoubted pressures.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My hon. Friend speaks movingly of the fact that is at the front of everyone’s minds: there but for the grace of God may go any one of us. Does she agree that the fact that 4% more people are being prevented from becoming homeless than last year does she agree that the fact that 4% more people are being prevented from becoming homeless than last year shows that local councils are in fact tackling homelessness very effectively?

Mrs Drummond: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I was disappointed that Opposition Members did not tell us earlier about what Labour councils are doing around the country, and just blamed the Government every time.

There are undoubted pressures. Difficulties with private landlords, domestic violence and eviction by parents are the most significant factors in Portsmouth. The council is coping well with the demands made of it, but we need to consider how we can prevent these circumstances from developing in the first place.

Sleeping rough is not something that anyone undertakes lightly, and those who have not done it must struggle to understand the blow it must be to one’s self-esteem and identity. Dignity can be hard to maintain. I therefore praise Portsmouth City Council’s work to give rough sleepers support. The homeless day service, run by The Society of St James, is available seven days a week, and provides advice on how to find a home. But more than that, it offers access to free showers and laundry services and a free breakfast.

There are currently 37 rough sleepers in the city, and as the cold weather begins to set in, their predicament is especially acute. The council recognises the problem. Over the winter months, the council can call on 36 beds for rough sleepers on an 8 pm to 8 am basis. During periods of severe cold, the number of beds can increase to 44. This means there is a bed, a bath and a breakfast available to nearly every rough sleeper in our city over the coldest months of the year. I hope we can all agree how important it is that local authorities support these services.

There is much to praise in the charity sector in my city, too. On Christmas day, there will be two places providing lunches for homeless people in the city. Portsmouth Anglican cathedral will cater for 60 people who are homeless, lonely or finding it hard to manage the cost of Christmas lunch. The lunch will be catered by the excellent FoodCycle Pompey. Volunteers will prepare a three-course meal from food that would otherwise have been thrown away by supermarkets. Elsewhere in the city, the Salvation Army will hold its annual Christmas lunch at Southsea Citadel, where some of the people will have been referred by the council’s homeless day service. I thank everybody involved for putting on those lunches. Particularly at Christmas, the burden of social exclusion can be unbearable, and efforts to keep people in touch with others are in the true spirit of the season.

Ending the breakdown of the corporate family is the business of the Children and Social Work Bill. As I have said in this House before, parental duties do not lapse as soon as a child reaches the age of majority; it is optimistic even to think that they end when the child is 21. Anyone here who is a parent of young adults will say as much. I am therefore delighted that the Bill looks to extend the duty of responsibility for those in care to the age of 25, keeping care leavers off the streets. The Homelessness Reduction Bill, on whose Committee I am pleased to serve, does similar work. I support the duty on local authorities to become involved before people become homeless. The Bill will also double the period for which support will be available.

I have not focused on the bricks and mortar, or even the hard cash, of homelessness; those matters have been well ventilated by others. Instead, I have tried to stress that there is so much more to homelessness than simply being unhoused; it is about families and their breakdown; children and their welfare; human dignity and self-respect. I urge those who are overtaken by events to seek help as soon as possible. I reiterate my thanks and admiration for those in Portsmouth, and around the country, who are showing homeless people that they are valuable members of society.
I want to draw particular attention to the plight of homeless women and the unique challenges that they face. There are different causes of homelessness for different groups. In a particularly stark example, Crisis estimates that about four fifths of homeless women in England are fleeing domestic violence. When I first sought statistics to assess the scale of female homelessness, it was chilling to be told by Crisis and St Mungo’s that it was almost impossible to estimate, for the simple reason that so many homeless women deliberately remain invisible because they are in fear of their lives. The Library, however, was able to break down the local authority statistics by household type, showing that the largest pool of homeless applicants were female lone parents, who make up nearly half of those applying to councils. When women in couples with children and women without children are factored in, over two thirds of applicants were female—nearly 50,000 women in one year. Most of those were parents, so there is a clear relation to the equally stark fact that 120,000 children will be homeless this Christmas, according to Shelter. That is quite a figure that all of us in this House should feel ashamed of.

Preventing the problem is vital, of course, but I also want to talk about the reality of life for those women who, for whatever reason, find themselves homeless. The Homeless Period is a new campaign to highlight the problems faced by homeless women in acquiring sanitary products. It should go without saying that most women take these for granted as a fact of life, but whereas homeless shelters have an allowance from the Government to provide items such as condoms, they have no such allowance to buy female sanitary products. I have been horrified by the reports coming out of the campaign of the conditions in which homeless women are forced to live: reports of women faced with the choice between buying food and buying tampons, or forced to decide which is less dignified—stealing sanitary products or doing without. Put simply, it is enough of an affront to human dignity for a person to be homeless in the first place, but that is multiplied by the fear—for women who are forced to sleep rough, a very real fear—of their own natural bodily functions. A lack of access to basic hygiene also poses health risks that women can ill afford when they are already in one of the most vulnerable positions imaginable.

I recently met again with Laura Coryton, who campaigns so effectively on the tampon tax. She, The Homeless Period campaign and others are calling for donations of sanitary products to food banks and homeless shelters, so that no woman in such desperate circumstances is forced to suffer the indignities I have just described. I wish to place on record my thanks to Laura and all those campaigning on this vital issue for the work they are doing to improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable women in our society.

I am also pleased to tell the House that just this week I have worked with Boots to set up a pilot scheme through which they will donate sanitary products to food banks, and also encourage donations from their customers in store. We will start in my constituency—of course—this winter, and if that is a success, I hope it can be replicated up and down the country.

But it is not enough to rely on charity alone. The Government need to intervene sooner rather than later. It is not enough for them to choose between tackling either symptom or cause.

When I started campaigning in this House on the tampon tax, some hon. Members recoiled, while others did not even want to talk about periods or tampons, as if the words themselves were obscene. I do not regret providing such a culture shock to this place—quite the opposite—but that reaction exemplifies why the issue of homeless women’s access to sanitary care is so widespread and terribly underestimated. As The Homeless Period campaign says, “it doesn’t bear thinking about—and that’s the problem.” I hope that hon. Members from all parties, especially the Minister, will bear thinking about it today, and that we will not only acknowledge the problem but start to find solutions.

5.46 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff). She is doing fantastic work in the area of tampons and provision for the homeless.

As a member of the Communities and Local Government Committee, I have seen for myself the challenges of homelessness. Nobody should have to live on the streets. Not only do too many do so, but many more are only one or two missed paycheques from joining them, and that is a real point in our society: there is so little buffer. So few people have savings in place, and so many of us are captured by debt. People find themselves in rental arrears with county court judgments and other factors that stop them getting further tenancy agreements. That blights the lives of thousands of people across this country.

My hon. Friend the Minister made a very brave speech, in which he said that there were failings, and that the figure for rough sleeping is not good enough in this country, in this economy at this time. That was very brave, in the face of a poised but also very political speech by the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey). I congratulate the Minister. His point stands, but I genuinely believe that there is a step change going on right now. Many of the statistics that have been mentioned in this debate—I will not rehash them—show that there is this step change. We need to work together, and, as the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, we need interconnectivity. People need to stop working in silos and we need to think from start to finish.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that local authorities work together with the Local Government Association to tackle the pernicious practice—born of desperation—of local authorities shuffling their homeless people round the country to other local authorities, sometimes in the hands of rapacious private landlords who use housing benefit regulations loopholes to get more money? That sometimes means serving section 21 notices on existing tenants.

Julian Knight: That is a good point. I know for a fact that that occurs in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and he has seen the dramatic effects of moving people in that way.

The clearest example of the Government’s determination to tackle rough sleeping is the decision to support the Homelessness Reduction Bill, which was introduced
by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). It was drawn up by colleagues on the CLG Committee and based on our independent research and findings. The Bill would mandate councils to provide 56 days of support to homeless individuals, and to make sure that other services refer people who are at risk of homelessness to the council’s housing team. Most importantly, the Bill would require local authorities to help at-risk individuals to find accommodation before they end up on the streets—not no second night sleeping out, but no first night sleeping out. Such early intervention is crucial to tackling these problems before the costs, both financial and human, start to mount.

Although my patch, Solihull, aims to provide a high-quality response to the needs of those who are already on the streets, prevention has become the central focus of the borough’s homelessness strategy in recent times. The council and partners co-operate to identify and assist vulnerable households, members of which are in immediate danger of becoming homeless. I am pleased to report that our council has passed the first stage in achieving the gold standard for homelessness and housing advice services, and it has pledged not to rest until it reaches that goal and can guarantee Solihull residents the support services that they deserve and increasingly need. As my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) has mentioned, there is a lot of hidden homelessness—sofa-surfing, and so on—even in seemingly well-to-do areas.

Unfortunately, the high standard of care for which Solihull aims is not universal. Earlier this month, many of my constituents and I were shocked to hear of a young man freezing to death in neighbouring Birmingham, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). I hope and believe that the Homelessness Reduction Bill will help to focus minds on the human costs of homelessness and guide local authorities towards effective policies that are preventive where possible, and remedial where necessary.

Enacting the Homelessness Reduction Bill would be a great step towards tackling homelessness in the best way: by preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place. That it was drawn up, unusually, by a Select Committee demonstrates the depth of concern inside and outside the House. The Government, Opposition parties and the country need to rise to that challenge together, and the Government’s support for the Bill is proof that they share that ambition.

5.52 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am speaking in this debate because I am angry. I am angry because in one of the richest countries in the world, the number of people sleeping rough on our streets is going up; I am angry because the number of families placed in temporary accommodation is increasing; and I am angry because the cuts to housing benefit mean that more and more of my constituents are unable to cover their rent, so they find themselves out on the streets with their belongings.

I am angry, but I am also sad. I am sad because if someone is on the minimum wage in an area such as mine and they do not have a council or housing association property, their chances of finding somewhere decent and affordable to live are close to zero. I am also sad that children often pay the highest price. A family may be placed in a bed and breakfast miles away from their children’s school, because the local authority cannot source local properties at an affordable rent.

When I became an MP six years ago, it was uncommon for anyone to visit my advice surgery because they were a rough sleeper. It was uncommon, but not unknown: there were men who would ride night buses trying to keep warm, and some would find shelter in disused garages or parks. Now, it is commonplace. At one advice surgery in October, I saw four people in the space of as many hours, all of whom were set to sleep outside that evening. They could have been the people my constituents see on a daily basis on a mattress underneath the arches next to Lewisham station, in sleeping bags in Ladywell Fields or huddled and cold on wet cardboard outside the BP garage on Lee High Road. It is all too easy to walk by and to think that it is someone else’s problem. It is not, though; it is our problem, and as a country we need to fix it.

Rob Marris: As well as being angry, does my hon. Friend share my dismay? There is a consensus in the House about the need to do something about homelessness, but homelessness is not a problem that drops out of the sky. Homelessness and the explosion in the number of people using food banks are consequences of Government policy in the last six years.

Heidi Alexander: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. As I said in my intervention on the Minister, the previous Government cut the national affordable house building programme by 63% in 2011 and they have an awful lot to answer for.

I want to share with colleagues one story that underlines the need for change. At my advice surgery in Downham a few weeks ago, I met a man called Terry. Terry is not his real name, but for reasons that will become obvious, he does not want his real name to be known. Terry, who is in his 60s, works with young men at risk of getting into trouble with the law. He has lived alone for the past few years, having gone through a divorce. Terry used to pay £650 a month for a one-bedroom flat—cheap by Lewisham standards—but then the rent doubled overnight. He could not afford it, and he had to move out. Terry now sleeps in a van. He has not told his children because he is too embarrassed, and he cannot get help from the council because he is not deemed to be in priority need. When I hear Conservative politicians say, “If you can’t afford to live in London, you should move out”, I wonder whether they mean people like Terry—people who have not done anything wrong, and have done quite a lot right.

Julian Knight: Will the hon. Lady name the Conservative politician involved? Was it a councillor or a Member of Parliament? I am just wondering who that quote comes from.

Heidi Alexander: Anyone listening to the rhetoric during the last Parliament will be under no illusions about what certain members of the former Government have said. I say this to the Government on behalf of my constituents: wake up! They should wake up and invest in social housing. They should wake up and build homes that people can afford to live in. They should
wake up and stop pumping money into the bank accounts of private landlords and build social housing instead.

Dr Poulter: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Heidi Alexander: I am afraid I will not give way, because I have already had my injury time.

I have previously spoken in the Chamber about the disparity that can exist between the housing benefit paid out on private rented property and that on social housing. If we take two families in receipt of full housing benefit in my constituency, with one in a two-bedroom private rented flat and one in a two-bedroom council flat, the annual benefit paid on the private rented property will be almost £9,000 more than that paid on the council flat. We cannot afford to go on like this. We all know—the Chancellor confirmed as much a few weeks back—that the public finances are likely to be shot to pieces as a result of Brexit. I fear for my constituents in these circumstances, and that makes it all the more important that the Government make the right choices. They should fund local authorities adequately, shift the public subsidy from benefits to bricks and mortar, and build social housing. Until we do that, any attempts to tackle homelessness will always be destined to fail.

5.58 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), who made such a powerful case on behalf of her area. I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

The causes of homelessness are many and varied. It is all too easy for us to concentrate on one particular issue. I apologise for not being present for the Labour Front-Bench spokesman’s speech—I meant no disrespect; I was in a Committee meeting elsewhere in the Palace, and the timing of this debate meant that I was held up—but the reality is that homelessness peaked under the previous Labour Government at over 300,000 applications in 2003-04. By 2010, because of action taken by the Labour Government, it had dropped dramatically, and it has been rising steadily ever since. It is quite clear that we must address that.

I am very thankful for all the comments about my Homelessness Reduction Bill. I thank everyone who spoke on Second Reading, and those who are serving on the Public Bill Committee as we take it through the House. I look forward to its returning to this place early in 2017, going to the House of Lords and eventually becoming law.

That is only one part of the jigsaw puzzle in solving homelessness. I am clear that we have to deal with the problem of supply above all else, but we need to do other things as well. If we do not build proper affordable housing, quite clearly we will never solve this problem.

Dr Poulter: I commend my hon. Friend for his Bill. On the point he has just made, does he agree that a zeal for private home ownership at all costs is at the very root of this problem? We must deal with that if we are to tackle it in the longer term. We need more affordable homes and a genuine housing mix. That is the only way we will help people to avoid homelessness and find a sustainable solution.

Bob Blackman: Clearly we have the problem that Governments of all persuasions, as the Minister rightly said, have failed to build enough housing for almost 40 years. The reality is that the private sector will never build enough housing. We have had the announcement of the settlement for London, with £3.15 billion to build 90,000 affordable homes across London over the next three years. That is a great settlement. It is now incumbent on everyone to get on with building those properties. Public land is available on which they can be built, and it can.

We have to divide homelessness into two categories. There are rough sleepers—people who are on the street and who are at severe risk. Their health is bad and they are likely to be attacked. Many of them are on the streets for the first time and are extremely vulnerable. As I said in an intervention, it is likely that they will die as a result of sleeping rough. That is an absolute scandal in this day and age. They cost the health service huge amounts of money. They are likely to be addicted to drugs, alcohol or tobacco. We cannot blame them for that, because they are in a spiral of despair. We have to come together as a House to make sure that no one gets to the stage of sleeping rough.

There is also the problem of the hidden homeless—the sofa surfers. These are people who stay with family and friends until they exhaust all their family and friends and end up on the streets. Unless we address that issue, we will not solve the problem.

Last night, I went out with a brilliant team from St Mungo’s to identify people on the streets of the city of London who are sleeping rough. It is clear that those individuals have complex needs. It is not a magic solution to say, “Give them somewhere to live or sleep and that is the end of the problem.” They need counselling and support. They need a whole package of measures to help them get back on their feet and live what we would all call a normal life. Unfortunately, providing accommodation is not sufficient. That is an important point.

Equally, it is clear that one problem in society now is that private sector landlords are reluctant to rent homes to people who are homeless. I therefore ask the Government to consider a national deposit scheme, so that people who are in need of housing in the private sector can be provided with a deposit at a national level, rather than relying on local authorities to identify a deposit for them. That would secure private rented accommodation for people who are not in priority need. That would make a huge difference to the number of people who are declared homeless but are not assisted. We know that one of the challenges for people who are in difficulty is finding the deposit to buy a house or for private rented housing. That is something that the Government should consider.

I look forward to the publication of the White Paper on the development of new homes and the housing strategy. We all have to be clear that housing is a market. If we start interfering in a market, there are unintended consequences. I trust that my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench have considered all those aspects and, rather than tinkering with some of the measures, will get on with a national house building programme that we can all be proud of and with measures that will alleviate the homelessness crisis. I look forward to the other announcements that will no
doubt follow. Measures to reduce rough sleeping are paramount. If we do not address that problem quickly, we will lose too many people too early.

6.4 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I applaud my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench for their efforts in securing this important and timely debate.

I have witnessed homelessness at first hand, volunteering with Crisis at Christmas to hand out hundreds of turkey dinners to homeless people. I saw homelessness for what it is: not a problem confined to addicts or one that results only from mental health issues, but something that could happen to us all. We are all just three steps away from homelessness: one, you lose your job; two, you lose your partner; three, you lose your house. It could happen to anyone.

After years of what has been described as unprecedented decline, homelessness is now back on the rise. Rough sleeping has doubled, families living in emergency bed-and-breakfast and hostel rooms are up by 18% in only one year, homeless households have increased by 44%, and 120,000 children will be homeless this Christmas. We see it every day on our way in and out of work, with people sleeping in the entrances to Parliament on cardboard boxes and in sleeping bags.

Homelessness is not just confined to city centres. My constituency of Batley and Spen is not somewhere one would usually associate with homelessness; with not one single urban centre, we are a smattering of Yorkshire towns and villages. Yet, as I have said in this House before, when I was six my family fell behind on the mortgage repayments and we had to hand the keys of our home back to the building society. The council stepped in and found us a new home. But with 14,000 people on the Kirklees Council housing waiting list, it happened to us now. I am not sure what would become of my family. Perhaps we too would have to rely on the kindness of strangers, in an emergency bed and breakfast or even on the streets.

We know that the situation is getting worse, not better. The manager of the Batley drop-in centre at the Central Methodist Church told me just yesterday that his centre has seen a 15% year-on-year increase in people coming through the door. What stood out from our conversation is that not all those using the centre are what we would normally deem homeless. They are not all sleeping on the streets; most are sofa-surfing until the good will runs out and they have to move on to other friends. His explanation for the increase is threefold: at the church, for two days in the week, they do not have to pay for heating, they get a hot meal and a food parcel to take away, and—let us not forget this—they also get companionship, which must be thin on the ground when circumstances force someone to keep moving on.

As the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said, one third of households that become homeless do so when their private rented tenancy ends. We need to adapt to the needs of the growing number of families who rent. Longer-term, secure tenancies with affordable rent increases are essential, because homelessness is not always caused by the loss of a home, but is often due to an inability to find a new one. Crisis tells us that deposits average nearly £1,200, with agency fees to pay on top, so it is easy to see how a family ends up in financial difficulties. I applaud the hon. Gentleman’s call for a rent deposit guarantee system for homeless people and those faced with homelessness.

The Government’s support for the hon. Gentleman’s Homelessness Reduction Bill is welcome—as long as it is fully funded—but it will not address the lack of support for private renters or the chronic lack of investment in affordable homes. I welcome the pledge of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) to eradicate rough sleeping in the first term of a Labour Government. I know he has sent his proposals to the Prime Minister, so I hope that Government Members can give assurances that those proposals will be considered seriously.

Every single expert, organisation and Member of this House knows that the only long-term solution to homelessness is to build genuinely affordable homes for families to live in, because a home they can afford is not just bricks and mortar, but stability and security. Let us not find ourselves back in this place this time next year debating these same issues. Those 120,000 children deserve better, and we cannot let them down.

6.9 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What does homelessness actually entail? In the words of Rachel Moran in her excellent book, “Paid For”:

“The word ‘homeless’ seems to present the condition as a single lack, but homelessness is actually many individual deficiencies combined. The worst of them are emotional; but to mention the physical challenges first: the single worst bodily aspect of homelessness is exhaustion. It is caused by several factors, including sleep-deprivation, hunger and a constant need to remain on the move.”

This explanation of homelessness is insightful, because it shows us just how inadequate the word “homeless” is. To live without a fridge, cooker, television, shower, sofa or bed is a struggle that homeless people contend with daily. It might start with sleeping on a friend’s sofa, then another friend’s; but then a week-long stay becomes a day here, a day there, until the night comes when there is no sofa available, and instead a doorway is used, probably nearby at first, but then the person drifts; and one day they have to acknowledge that they are homeless. It does not start that way. We all see homeless people, but we never suspect that we will become one. How damaging to a person’s self-esteem and mental health is that moment when homelessness becomes an acknowledged reality? How does anyone find their way back?

In Scotland, the number of homelessness applications is decreasing, from a peak of over 60,000 in 2005-06 to 34,600 in 2015-16. Some 294 of these applications were made in my constituency, and that is 294 too many. We have made progress, but Shelter Scotland has indicated that there has been no underlying change in the drivers of homelessness. Almost half of those who have made homelessness applications in Scotland are single males, and 16% are single females with a child. Shamefully, many of those people are ex-service personnel—people who have made the highest commitment to serve their country but have not received the support they deserve.

Although homelessness is primarily tackled by the UK and devolved Governments, local authorities also play an important role. Scottish local authorities have been hindered by policies born in this place, such as the right to buy, which was not reinforced by a need to build.
According to Scottish Government statistics, we have lost over 450,000 homes from the social rented sector as a result of the right to buy, and thousands of the homes that remain are of dubious quality. It is estimated that about one in 10 households in Scotland are affected by dampness or condensation. Thankfully, the Scottish Government have ended the right to buy, and more than 16,000 new homes have been built in the last year—a rate higher than the UK average.

I hope to see this issue prioritised as a matter of public policy across the UK, particularly as homelessness is increasingly being stigmatised. Recently, The Huffington Post reported that Crisis spoke to 458 people who were sleeping rough or had slept rough in the last year and said they were facing “ever-more hostile streets”. Councils, developers, businesses and other organisations are deploying “defensive architecture”, including iron and concrete studs placed in flat areas to prevent homeless people from finding a place to sleep. It makes me wonder what the threat is and why we need to defend ourselves from it. A compassionate society should not be deploying medieval-style defences against vulnerable people who need assistance. So-called defensive architecture is dehumanising and sends a clear message: “go away, disappear, you’re not wanted.”

Homelessness is an issue of priorities. Instead of encouraging developers to build luxury apartments, some of which are bought up as investments and never lived in, we should be building social housing. Our welfare system must also be tailored in a compassionate way that enables people to have a platform on which to build their own lives. Our current system does not provide that support. A universal basic income could be a solution to address social ills and protect the most vulnerable from becoming homeless. At the very least we should be exploring that possibility, instead of tinkering around the edges of a system that is in need of a more fundamental reform. I will concede, however, that homelessness is a complex issue, and one that cannot be eliminated just by burying it with money and legislation. Homelessness is not only an issue of housing; it is also the product of inequality, poverty, domestic abuse, family breakdown and addiction. It can happen to anyone from any background.

In conclusion, we should never allow ourselves to accept homelessness as an inevitable result of a modern society. It is not inevitable and it does not need to happen. Complacency on the part of the UK Government will result in a failure to tackle this issue. Rising living costs, stagnating wages and the UK’s mismanaged welfare system result in a failure to tackle this issue. Rising living costs, stagnating wages and the UK’s mismanaged welfare system undermine the potential to offer annual fuel bills of just £70—yes, annual fuel bills. The first homes will be occupied this coming March. Swansons is a forward-thinking, ambitious local authority preparing for the future and offering solutions not just to homelessness but to fuel poverty.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): On my hon. Friend’s point about the work of Swansea Council, lots of Welsh local authorities are now moving to build more council housing because of the support from the Welsh Government for tackling homelessness and being able to build social housing. Does she agree that the Welsh Government and local government in particular are showing the way in tackling homelessness and affordable housing?

Carolyn Harris: I certainly do agree with my hon. Friend and I will come to that in a moment.

Right across Wales, the intention is to reduce homelessness by utilising both the private and social housing sectors. The commitment from the Welsh Government has been to fund proactive schemes to prevent homelessness. My local authority is a pioneer in this area. Between 2015 and 2016, more than 7,000 households were threatened with impending homelessness, but the Welsh Government were able to prevent 65% of them from becoming homeless. That proves that local authorities such as mine, and others right across Wales, are working with the Welsh Government to understand and tackle the problem. Maybe it is time the Westminster Government took a leaf out of the Welsh Government and Welsh local authorities’ “How to Tackle Homelessness” book.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call Chris Elmore. [Interruption.]

6.17 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, I was taken by surprise a bit. There is nothing like having two Welsh Members following each other, is there?

The motion before us notes that 120,000 children will be homeless this Christmas. That is a fact that should alarm every Member of the House and shame the Government for their inaction. The levels of homelessness across the UK show the worst consequences of ignoring the most vulnerable in society. There can be no excuse for the fact that the number of people sleeping rough doubled between 2010 and 2015. While this Government are refusing to acknowledge rising homelessness, I am glad to see a different approach being taken by the Welsh Government. In contrast to the Government in Westminster, the First Minister and his Government have shown time and again that they are not afraid to tackle the problem head on.
Unlike the UK Government, the Welsh Government have continued to fund affordable homes to rent as well as buy, allowed councils to suspend the right to buy in areas of high housing pressure and have not forced local authorities to sell vacant homes to the highest bidder. On top of that, the Welsh Government have introduced a housing Act designed to reduce homelessness through a stronger focus on prevention and, despite significant budget pressures, provided the necessary funding and resources.

Bob Blackman: On that point, is the hon. Gentleman aware that the total number of people presenting themselves as homeless for the whole of Wales is less than the figure for the single London borough of Lambeth?

Chris Elmore: I acknowledge that and understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying. What I am trying to stress is that there are different and more positive approaches to tackling homelessness, and the Welsh Government are leading the way on that.

I am incredibly proud of the action taken by the Welsh Labour Government to tackle homelessness, but equally I am incredibly proud of the work of the last Labour Government in this House and their efforts. When Labour is in government, be it in Wales or the UK as a whole, homelessness falls. Under the two previous Labour Prime Ministers, statutory homelessness fell by almost two thirds, and the number of people sleeping rough fell by three quarters. In Wales, in the first year of the Welsh Government’s Housing Act, 65% of families assessed as threatened with homelessness were successfully prevented from becoming homeless, as the shadow Secretary of State for Housing and indeed my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) mentioned.

This House needs a cross-party approach to tackle the scourge of homelessness across the UK. Labour Governments have repeatedly shown that it is possible to take action, and I hope this Government will today take note and work to help find everybody a home.

6.20 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I met a former constituent today at a community event in my constituency. I first met her two years ago when she was being evicted, with her young children, from her private sector home while she was receiving treatment for cancer. She was moved out of my constituency into temporary accommodation—and two years later, she is still there. She said to me, “I saw something about homelessness on the news this morning. Is that about people like me? Are they going to do something?” I would like to be able to say to her at the end of this debate, “Yes, the Government have made a commitment to sort out homelessness.”

Late last night, I checked my emails and found a message from a constituent whom I have been supporting over a number of issues in the past few months. He wrote that he had come home to find that his private landlord had changed the locks, leaving him, his wife and two very young children, who were running a fever, out on the streets with nowhere to go.

The other week, I saw a constituent in my surgery who was crying as she told me how hard it is to be living in temporary accommodation. She said, “It’s living out of boxes and bags. All I want is to make a home for my kids, but I can’t while we are living out of boxes and bags.” These stories are devastating, but they are absolutely typical of the experiences of thousands and thousands of people who are not sleeping rough, but who nevertheless do not have the security of a permanent home. There are 1,800 families, including 5,000 children in temporary accommodation in Lambeth—families who are facing Christmas without the essential security and comfort of a home. That is a disgrace.

I am pleased to support the Homelessness Reduction Bill and I have been working with colleagues on its detail. It responds directly to evidence we heard in the Communities and Local Government Committee inquiry into homelessness that the statutory framework governing support for homeless people is not fit for purpose and is not working because it allows too many people to go unsupported. Absolutely critical to the success of this Bill is the Government’s commitment to resource it and the level of the resource that they provide. We are almost at the end of the Committee stage of the Bill, but we still do not know how or at what level the Government will resource councils to implement the new duties and burdens that the Bill can introduce. I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity in his summing up speech to give some confirmation.

The Homelessness Reduction Bill is an important and necessary reform, but it is important for the Government to recognise that it addresses only one part of the problem. Supply is fundamental, but so is the nature of that supply. Evidence heard by the Communities and Local Government Committee in our inquiry into capacity in the homebuilding industry points to key skills shortages in the construction sector, but also to a private sector that is maxed out in the number of homes that it can deliver.

Our Committee returned this morning from a visit to Berlin, where we learned about the significant public sector resource—land, low-cost loans and direct public subsidy—that goes into delivering high levels of social housing at genuinely affordable rates. We have delivered the number of homes needed to keep pace with demand in the UK only in the post-war period when the public sector was directly delivering many thousands of homes.

I await the housing White Paper with anticipation, and I hope to see in it the policies we need to make a huge shift in the rate of homebuilding in this country. In the meantime, we are left with the private rented sector. I sat through weeks of debate last year on the Housing and Planning Act 2016—devastating legislation that did nothing about the single biggest cause of homelessness. While I support the banning of letting agents’ fees to tenants, that is only one issue in a sector urgently in need of reform. We need better security of tenure, and particularly in London we need to be able to limit the rate of rent increases that can be charged within the terms of a tenancy.

The Government must not be complacent in thinking that support for the Homelessness Reduction Bill means that they can tick the box for having solved homelessness. I hope the Minister will take the opportunity to set out today what the Government will do to fund genuinely affordable homes, to increase the rate of homebuilding and to reform the private rented sector, so that we can end the scandal of homelessness.
I end by paying tribute to the organisations in my constituency and across the country that will support homeless people this Christmas, helping homeless families through food banks or providing direct shelter and food to those in need, and to the many volunteers who help to make those operations happen. They are a reminder that we are a compassionate nation. We recognise homelessness as a scandal that shocks and horrifies us, and communities across the country want the Government to sort it.

6.25 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I want to talk about the issues facing young people today and then about complex cases of homelessness and the related problems.

At Prime Minister’s questions on 23 November I mentioned Aberdeen Cyrenians, a charity in my constituency. In fact, I think it may be in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig), but it is in my city anyway.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Our city.

Kirsty Blackman: Our city; I am sorry. I mentioned that charity and asked the Prime Minister about how austerity is increasing homelessness. The Prime Minister’s answer included the phrase “living within our means”, which is unfortunate phrasing. Homeless people do not have any means to live within. They do not have a house or other things. Today’s debate has been much more considered and measured and a lot less political than that exchange at PMQs.

I have heard young people today—as in people under about 35 or 40—being described as the precariat. They have precarious jobs. The gig economy is increasing and they do not have the long-term jobs that people used to have. They are subsisting on zero-hours contracts and do not have the same level of security as previous generations, who could walk into a job and have it for life. They do not have security in housing. They live incredibly expensively in the private rented sector, where not enough safeguards are in place to ensure security of tenure. As has been mentioned, people can come home and find that their locks have been changed, and their private sector landlord feels that that is the way forward. A huge number of landlords are not like that, but enough are to make it a problem.

Young people today are in precarious situations, and the risk of homelessness is real and one that we have not seen in recent generations. A study published in September found that 40% of families have less than £100 in savings. Much has been said today about so many of us being just a step away from homelessness, but that bears repeating—40% of families have less than £100 in savings. People do not have the extra cash in their pockets to deal with an unexpected change in situation, so homelessness is perhaps a bigger risk than it has been previously.

With austerity, benefits sanctions and the changes to the benefits system, the people with the most complex, chaotic lives are being disadvantaged the most. The Government cannot easily get them back into work, and they represent a figure that a few weeks of jobcentre intervention will not change. They need months of intervention—some may need years—due to their complex problems, including mental health issues, homelessness and being unable to hold down a job in recent years. They require huge amounts of intervention before they will be able to get back to being tax-paying, working members of society. It is quite easy, if the Government say they are not going to provide intensive support for those people, for them to fall between the cracks. Allowing that to happen in those complex cases is one of the worst things that this Government have done, and that causes a real issue of homelessness.

A huge number of other things can lead to homelessness. Domestic violence has been talked about a lot, and we have a debate on it on Friday. It can lead to women or men—in the main it is women—fleeing and finding themselves homeless or in an insecure tenancy. That is a real problem that they have to deal with at a time when they are going through a huge number of other problems too. Again, that problem is sometimes being left alone because it is too difficult to tackle and it is not an easy statistic to change—the Government cannot easily get people back into work and back into a secure place.

As someone who was elected to a local authority in 2007, I am a passionate advocate against the right to buy. I saw the damage it caused to our communities and the number of people who do not have a permanent roof over their head as a result of it, and the Government need to change their plans on it.

6.30 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): We have had a well-informed debate. I appreciate the contributions from Members on both sides of the House and respect their passion and sincerity, but nothing that has been said has distracted from, let alone contradicted, the three stark statistics in the motion, which indict this Government’s record on homelessness. Those are a 44% increase in statutory homelessness since 2010—there is an absolute duty to the most vulnerable and those in the most need—a doubling in street homelessness, which is the most obvious and insistent evidence of our failure as a society to provide all our citizens with the basic necessities of life, and 120,000 children being homeless this Christmas.

We have heard 17 Back-Bench speeches in this short debate, which shows the degree of interest in this subject. We have heard from the hon. Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh), my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) and for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), and the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). We have heard from every part of the British Isles. I apologise if I do not have the time to comment on each of those speeches, as they all had much to recommend them.
I will not do the speeches justice by summarising them, but I have to say that what I heard in a number of speeches by Conservative Members—I exempt the hon. Member for Harrow East from this—was real distress at individual cases in surgeries and in the streets, but no real appreciation of the link between those cases and their own Government’s policy. I credit the hon. Gentleman, as he acknowledged the scale of the problem and how it has risen.

A number of my colleagues made the point about where the blame lies, and although I am being invidious by singling anyone out, I do single out my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East, for Westminster North and for Birmingham, Erdington, whose experience over many years and indeed decades in areas of very high housing stress enabled them to put the blame where it lies: with Government policy, with local government cuts and with the persistent failure to build social housing and relieve the pressure.

The Government’s amendment does them no credit. It is a nit-picker’s attempt to sidestep the central causes of the homelessness crisis, which this Government and their coalition predecessor have caused. What is beyond dispute is that the measures the Government rely on in their defence are not working. If they were, we would not have seen a year-on-year worsening in the plight of homeless persons. No one says it will be easy to resolve issues that are now chronic and endemic across the UK, particularly in London and other areas with high demand and a poor supply of affordable homes. The Minister could at least begin to tackle the worst aspects of homelessness by signing up today to the proposals to tackle rough sleeping set out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) and tackling street homelessness through an extension of the clearing house scheme, which both Labour and Tory Governments have supported in the past. There is nothing inevitable about homelessness. The record of the last Labour Government showed that with a two-thirds drop in statutory homelessness in the 10 years to 2010 and a three-quarters drop in rough sleeping in the same period.

I noticed how, in opening the debate, the Minister for Housing and Planning tried to minimise Labour’s achievements and talk up his own party’s achievements. I suppose that that is his job, but independent audit has a different view. I hope that he and the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), who will be replying to the debate, have read the “Green Book”, which was published this month by Shelter to mark its 50th anniversary and the 50th anniversary of “Cathy Come Home”. It says:

“The numbers of households living in temporary accommodation and the numbers of people found sleeping rough on a given night have risen for the last five years. The number of households coming to their council and being found to be homeless and in priority need is over a quarter higher than five years ago. The number of households accepted as homeless started to rise in 2010. Even more striking is that this followed a period of six years when the level of homelessness appeared to drop sharply. The sharp turn that the homelessness statistics made after 2009 is a striking trend.”

Callum McCaig: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that developer contributions are an important way of attracting additional funds for local authorities to build affordable housing to help tackle the problem of homelessness? Does he share my disappointment that my local council has forgone £30 million in developer contributions for student accommodation that could have helped to alleviate homelessness in Aberdeen?

Andy Slaughter: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I am not an expert in planning gain in his own local authority area. There are a number of ways of funding affordable homes, and I will come on to one or two of them in a moment. He is right to identify that matter as being the root cause of the problem.

I turn to the Homelessness Reduction Bill, which we were considering in Committee this morning and which the Government pray in aid in their amendment. A number of Members who are on the Bill Committee have mentioned it. That Bill is the brain child of Crisis and is supported by St Mungo’s Broadway, Shelter and the consensus of opinion across the housing sector. Those excellent organisations have been on the frontline against homelessness for decades. Like many Members, I have been proud to work with them in my constituency.

More importantly for the Bill’s chances of making it to the statute book, it has the support of all parties and of the Government, and has been ably promoted by the hon. Member for Harrow East. It is no exaggeration to say that it will make a sea change in homelessness law, both through the emphasis it places on prevention and through the changes that it imposes on local authorities to assist non-priority groups, particularly single people, in finding accommodation.

In promoting the Bill, Crisis is also making the statement that it can no longer be expected to pick up the pieces of the failure of much of the apparatus designed to help the homeless. I welcome the Bill both for the signal that it sends and for the detailed requirements that it places on the Government to tackle this growing crisis, but—this “but” has dominated our discussions forthrough the emphasis it places on prevention and through the changes that it imposes on local authorities to assist non-priority groups, particularly single people, in finding accommodation.

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Bill are fully funded. I hear what the Government have said about that, but we are still waiting. The Under-Secretary has promised that we will have details of the funding before the Committee reports. It is important that that pledge is honoured and is not just a paper promise. We must clearly see that the measure will be fully funded, otherwise it simply will not work and local authorities will again carry the can for central Government’s mistakes.

The third and most important issue is the effect of the Government’s general policies on housing and homelessness. In the area of housing finance, the benefit cap has just been further reduced, which has had an attritional effect on my authority and many others. The freeze on local housing allowance, the introduction of the bedroom tax and 45% cuts in the Supporting People budget in the last Parliament are unprecedented cuts, and the net effect is to destabilise the people who are most vulnerable and most at risk of homelessness.

In the private rented sector, rent increases and the ability for private landlords to charge higher rents to make more profit mean that evictions are at a high. Some 40% in London—30% nationally—of people presenting to local authorities cite the serving of a section 21 notice, or the no-fault eviction process. We have heard it argued that as a result we need the Bill to put more responsibility on local authorities, but what about the responsibility of the Government to legislate for longer tenancies and, as we would do, to legislate for rent control to combat rent rises during a tenancy? That would have a much more salutary effect in preventing homelessness.

Gavin Barwell rose—

Andy Slaughter: If the Minister does not mind, I will not give way, as I have only two minutes left, and I do not want to take time away from his colleague the Under-Secretary.

Housing supply is the key issue. We have the lowest social housing build on record. We still face the prospect of the sale of high-value council homes, and a reduction in rent has prevented councils from building new social homes. We have 140,000 fewer council homes than in 2010. Unless that problem is tackled we will never tackle the problem of homelessness.

That is the story of the Homelessness Reduction Bill, but it is also the story of this Government and their attitude not just to homelessness but to the housing crisis generally. They talk about solutions, but their policies have made matters worse. We have been promised cash for the implementation of the Bill and we have been promised wider initiatives in the delayed White Paper, but time is running out for the Government to act. Empty words and empty Bills will not stop children being homeless at Christmas or vulnerable people sleeping on the streets. Tomorrow, the new figures on statutory homelessness will be published, but they are unlikely to bring any comfort to the homeless or to the Government. This is a crisis that the Government have neglected, and have even aggravated with the range of policies that they have pursued. If they are sincere about tackling the problems of homelessness, words will no longer suffice—only action will.

6.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I thank the Opposition for bringing this important debate to the House. It has given Members across the House an opportunity to discuss a critical issue, and it gives me the opportunity to outline the actions that this Government are taking to meet the challenge.

This has been a good debate. Time does now allow me to do justice to all the contributions, which were excellent, but I will endeavour to respond to as many of the points as I can within the time available. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning stated at the outset, the Government are committed to tackling homelessness. I reiterate that that is a priority for me and for the Government. No one should find themselves without a roof over their head. As my hon. Friend outlined earlier, we are supporting the largest house building programme of any Government since the 1980s, but as many hon. Members have said, homelessness is not just a housing issue. Tackling it requires a collective response at both national and local levels and an unrelenting focus on prevention.

There are many good examples of early intervention around the country. We want to drive good practice to help all areas learn from the experiences and take on the good practice of the councils that are doing things the right way. To kick-start this, we have launched a £50 million homelessness prevention programme, which takes an end-to-end approach to preventing more people from becoming homeless and helping people to get their lives back on track when they have fallen through the safety net provided. Our programme will mean innovation and collaboration to prevent homelessness.

Our £20 million grant funding for prevention trailblazer areas will help areas to go further and faster with reform, laying the groundwork for many of the changes that we want to see through the Homelessness Reduction Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). Those areas will develop and adopt best practice and data-driven approaches to identify people at risk of homelessness and provide them with early support to prevent a crisis.

Southwark, Newcastle and Greater Manchester—our early adopters—will be taking forward a range of initiatives. Successful projects will involve collaboration between a wide range of services to identify people who are at risk of homelessness and help them well before they are threatened with eviction. Trailblazer areas will test innovative approaches to preventing homelessness to help us build our evidence base on what we know works.

The £20 million rough sleeping grant fund, which forms part of this programme, will enable local areas to intervene early with rough sleepers before their problems become ingrained and to build a better local multiagency partnership to address people’s underlying problems. Building on the successes of the London rough sleeping social impact bond, the £10 million rough sleeping fund for social impact bonds will allow local partnerships to work with some of the most entrenched rough sleepers, focusing on getting them into accommodation and using personalised support to address their complex needs.
Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks about me. Does he agree that one of the issues for rough sleepers and people threatened with homelessness is the complexity of the various reasons? Homelessness is not always the result of a private sector rental coming to an end. It may be caused by relationship breakdown. A homeless person may be an ex-offender or someone leaving the armed forces who is not used to settled accommodation. All these issues need personalised plans to assist those people to get into decent accommodation.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend is right. Sometimes it is easy for us to simplify the challenges surrounding homelessness and rough sleeping, but most informed Members know that the position is far more complex. I welcome the provisions in his Bill for a personal plan that local authorities must go through with individuals, both people who are homeless and are owed a duty by a local authority to be housed and people who are not owed a duty to be housed. For the first time, they will get bespoke support. I thank my hon. Friend for raising that.

My hon. Friend is right to point out that we must deal with this challenge at a local level, but I am also absolutely committed to making sure we work effectively across the Government to tackle it. I am driving action across the Government through a ministerial working group on homelessness, and one example I can give the House is in regard to mental health, where we are looking at what more can be done to make sure rough sleepers with mental health problems get the specialist support they need. The group is also looking at how we can ensure that people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, receive the help they need to get into work.

I want now to pick up on a number of the comments hon. Members made. First, it was great to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond). She extolled the virtues of the way in which Portsmouth City Council is trying to tackle homelessness, particularly through prevention and the work it is doing upfront to try to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. It was good to hear that the council is also working closely with local charities and other partners, and that is something we certainly want to see in the proposals local areas bring to us in relation to the grant-funding programmes we are providing.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) made a number of important points. She mentioned the rough-sleeping statistics. They are now much more accurate than they were in 2010, when local authorities were not obliged to provide a return to central Government in relation to how many rough sleepers there were in their areas. They are now compelled to do that, so the data are far more accurate. We are looking, though, at how we can improve the data that the Department holds, and we are doing so by trying to work out when people become homeless on multiple occasions and how we can prevent that from happening again to them.

I welcome what the hon. Lady said about the work Boots is doing in relation to sanitary products for women who, unfortunately, find themselves sleeping rough—an issue that she is particularly interested in. A number of programmes are centrally funded from the Department for Communities and Local Government for outreach organisations that deal with rough sleepers. In that sense, we do provide funding to those organisations, and they do, in turn, provide the type of support the hon. Lady rightly recognises is required for women rough sleepers.

Bob Marris: May I take the Minister back to the question of data? The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for example, raised the issue of hidden homelessness and sofa-surfing. The Minister has just said that the figures on rough sleepers are getting more accurate—I welcome that—but what are the Government doing to collect more accurate data on hidden homelessness and the sofa surfers, who are particularly at risk of becoming rough sleepers?

Mr Jones: That is obviously a much more difficult thing to measure, but with regard to the Homelessness Reduction Bill, which the Government are backing, I am absolutely sure, and we are certainly factoring this into our sums, that a significantly higher number of single people who are homeless—the type of people the hon. Gentleman identifies—will present at a local authority, because they will expect to receive far better advice and support than they do now, and they will have a personal plan, which we hope will allow their homelessness to be alleviated. So I think we will be able to measure that in a better way. On whether we can go as far as identifying all those people, I think that would be rather difficult.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East was right to identify the challenges, particularly in London. He was also right to identify the record funding—£3.15 billion—that the Government are providing to the Mayor of London to build 90,000 new homes across a range of tenures to suit the needs of Londoners. It is great to see that in a spirit of co-operation the Mayor has welcomed that record funding.

My hon. Friend also hit the nail on the head when he said that just having a place for a rough sleeper to stay is not enough, as we discussed earlier in the debate. We have to look at the underlying personal challenges and tackle them in the work that we do. The cross-Government working group that I lead is looking to tackle a number of other issues in that regard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) made an excellent speech in which he particularly highlighted his knowledge of this subject as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness. He highlighted the tragic consequences that can happen where rough sleepers are not supported sufficiently, as did the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight). I was heartened to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South about his support for the Government’s programmes, particularly those on tackling rough sleeping.

The hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) mentioned a housing association in her constituency that she said was not providing adequate housing conditions for its tenants. That is an extremely serious situation if it is the case. I recommend that she take that up with the local council. I would be keen to hear more detail from her on the types of issues that are being experienced. I can say, as somebody who was quite heavily involved in the Housing and Planning Act 2016, that there are now significant penalties for rogue landlords. Local authorities
can now levy significant financial penalties of up to £30,000 on rogue landlords who do not provide adequate housing for the people to whom they rent property.

My hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for St Ives (Derek Thomas) made excellent speeches underlining the causes of rough sleeping. They were absolutely right to highlight the role of charitable workers and volunteers, who do tremendous work up and down the country. I would like to thank those volunteers, on behalf of the Government, for doing such an excellent job on behalf of a group of very vulnerable people.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) mentioned funding for the Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has brought to the House. I can assure the hon. Lady that it is the Government’s intention to fund the Bill. We recognise that new burdens will be created, and as the new obligations on councils come forward, we will fund that. We fully expect, though, that the Bill will create a situation whereby councils deal with homelessness far more quickly. It will therefore become far cheaper for local authorities to deal with and support people because they will not be dealing with a housing crisis as often as they do currently. She referred to temporary accommodation. I can assure her that, by law, temporary accommodation must be suitable. If it is not in the case of the constituent she mentioned then that constituent has the right to a review and should go back to her local authority in that regard.

This has been an excellent debate on an extremely important issue. Our ambitions are backed by a new funding programme and the most ambitious legislative reform in decades. This Government are taking an end-to-end approach to tackling homelessness because we—

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I hear the Opposition Chief Whip asking whether the Question might now be put, but I think he was just pipped to the post by the Minister concluding and sitting down.

Mr Jones: Madam Deputy Speaker, I beg to move that—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): No, the Minister had perfectly discharged his duty, so there is no necessity for the Question on the closure to be put. I shall put the Question.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)), that the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 230, Noes 289.

Division No. 112] [7 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Brabin, Tracy
Bradhaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coyey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowen, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Edwards, Jonathan
Elford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flyn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gethins, Stephen
Gibbon, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Gilliland, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate

Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Mr Kevan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Laverty, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
MacTaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rahael
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kenny
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Mclnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Meahe, Sir Alan
Means, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
O’keely, Sarah
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
NOES

Adams, Nigel
Ariyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brim, Steven
Bruce, Fiona
Burns, Conor

Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeth, Wes
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewiss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thompson, Owen
Thompson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Tigg, Derek
Tigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Elidid
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Zeichner, Daniel

Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Allsair
Cairns, rh Alan
Carmichael, Neil
Cardillige, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverty, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Counts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinev, Caroline
Djiongoly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle

Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evennott, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fyash, Marcus
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Gray, rh Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Hartridge, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot

Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddle, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mark, rh Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLaughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mil ton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Morrison, Dr Andrew
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Noran, Jesse
Nuttall, rh Mr David
Oford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Osborne, rh Mr George
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penrose, John
Perry, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Resolved,
That this House notes that homelessness is lower now than at its peak in 2003-04; further notes that England has a strong safety net, and that the provision of temporary accommodation means no family with a child ever has to be without a roof over their heads; notes that the Government is going further with legislative protection by supporting the hon. Member for Harrow East’s Homelessness Reduction Bill to ensure that everyone gets the help they need to prevent or relieve their homelessness; welcomes the Government’s protection of £31.5 million homelessness prevention funding for local authorities and £149 million in central funding; notes in particular the recently launched £50 million homelessness prevention programme, helping areas all over the country to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping; and notes that one of the best ways to tackle homelessness is by increasing the housing supply, which the measures contained in the forthcoming Housing White Paper will address.

Business without Debate

Deferred Divisions

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)),
That, at this day’s sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Brandon Lewis relating to the Europol (Opt-in Decision) and the Motion in the name of Secretary Amber Rudd relating to the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) (No. 3) Order 2016.—(Steve Brine.)

Question agreed to.

European Union Documents

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)),

Europol (Opt-in Decision)

That this House takes note of Unnumbered European Union Document, a Regulation (EU) 2016/794 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) and replacing and repealing Council decisions 2009/371/JHA, 2009/934/JHA, 2009/935/JHA, 2009/936/JHA and 2009/968/JHA; endorses the Government’s decision to opt in under Protocol 21 on the Position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice annexed to the EU Treaties; and supports the Government’s assessment that Europol provides a valuable service to the United Kingdom and opting in would enable the United Kingdom to maintain its current access to the agency, until the United Kingdom leaves the EU.—(Steve Brine.)

Question agreed to.
Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism

7.14 pm

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): I beg to move,

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) (No. 3) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 12 December, be approved.

The threat level in the UK, which is set by the independent joint terrorism analysis centre, remains at severe. That means that a terrorist attack in our country is highly likely and could occur without warning. We can never entirely eliminate the threat from terrorism, but we are determined to do all we can to minimise it and keep the public safe. The nature of terrorism is constantly evolving. There are organisations that recruit, radicalise and promote and encourage terrorism, as well as those that commit terrible acts of violence against innocent people.

Proscription is an important part of the Government's strategy to disrupt the full range of terrorist activities. The group we propose to add to the list of terrorist organisations, amending schedule 2 to the Terrorism Act 2000, is National Action. This is the 21st order to organisations, amending schedule 2 to the Terrorism Act 2000, is National Action. This is the 21st order to organise, or to wear clothing or carry articles in public that arouse reasonable suspicion that they are a member or supporter of a proscribed organisation.

Mr Wallace: It has not happened since July. Two groups have been deproscribed. The People's Mujahedin of Iran or the MEK was deproscribed at the High Court and a Sikh group linked to allegations of extremism made representations and was deproscribed as a result.

Despite its name, National Action seeks to divide communities and stir up hatred—actions that are entirely contrary to the interests of our nation. Proscribing this neo-Nazi group will prevent its membership from growing and prevent it from spreading propaganda, which allows a culture of hatred and division to thrive. It will also help to prevent National Action from radicalising people who may be vulnerable to extreme ideologies and at risk of emulating the terrorist acts it glorifies.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister share my view that we should all revile this group because its members stood on the steps of St George's Hall in Liverpool during one of its demonstrations and did Nazi salutes, which filled the whole of Liverpool with hatred and disgust for them? People will welcome this move today.

Mr Wallace: Anyone who seeks to glorify the Nazis is a threat to this country and our values. Members of this House died fighting Nazis to keep this country and Europe free. I would describe people who think that this country would somehow like to follow a Nazi course of action as twisted to say the least.

Under section 3 of the Terrorism Act 2000, the Home Secretary has the power to proscribe an organisation if she “believes that it is concerned in terrorism.” If the statutory test is met, the Home Secretary may exercise her discretion to proscribe the organisation. The Home Secretary takes into account a number of factors in considering whether to exercise that discretion, including the nature and scale of the organisation’s activities and the need to support other members of the international community in tackling terrorism.

The effect of proscription is that a listed organisation is outlawed and is unable to operate in the United Kingdom. It is a criminal offence for a person to belong to, support or arrange a meeting in support of a proscribed organisation, or to wear clothing or carry articles in public that arouse reasonable suspicion that they are a member or supporter of a proscribed organisation. Proscription acts to halt fundraising and recruitment, and makes it possible to seize cash associated with the organisation.

Given its wide-ranging impact, the Home Secretary exercises her power to proscribe only after thoroughly reviewing the available evidence on an organisation, including open source material, intelligence material and advice that reflects consultation across Government, including with intelligence and law enforcement agencies. The cross-Government proscription review group supports the Home Secretary in the decision-making process. The decision to proscribe is taken only with great care and after careful consideration of the particular case. It is appropriate that it must be approved by both Houses.

Having carefully considered all the evidence, the Home Secretary believes that National Action is currently concerned in terrorism, and that discretionary factors weigh in favour of proscription.

Luciana Berger: The Home Secretary told us just the other week that she was particularly concerned about the increasingly sophisticated methods that this group was using on the internet both to recruit new members and to promote its warped ideology. Will the Minister share a little more about how, if the order is passed, he and the Home Office will ensure that this organisation is held to account and any material it puts online is removed?

Mr Wallace: I have to be careful that we do not undermine the operational capability and effectiveness of the law agencies, which may take action. But it is certainly the case that, when an organisation is proscribed, it allows us to bring the full force of those agencies to bear on the threat posed by the proscribed organisation and the individuals within it. Within that, I would expect measures to make sure that any use of the internet for what is a kind of grooming is restricted or, I would hope, stopped completely, along with other measures. But I will leave that up to the security services and the police, as that will get the best effect, and it would be wrong of me to speculate further about what they may or may not do.

Although I cannot comment on the specific intelligence behind the decision to proscribe, I can provide the House with a summary of the group's activities. National Action is a racist neo-Nazi group that was established in 2013. It has a number of branches across the United
Kingdom, and conducts threatening street demonstrations and activities aimed at intimidating local communities. Its activities and propaganda materials are particularly aimed at recruiting young people. National Action’s ideology promotes the idea that Britain will inevitably see a violent race war, which the group claims to be an active part of.

The group rejects democracy, is hostile to the British state and seeks to divide society by implicitly endorsing violence against ethnic minorities and perceived race traitors. National Action has links to other extreme right-wing groups abroad, including in Europe. In May 2016, National Action members attended the Buchenwald concentration camp, where they made Nazi salutes and posted images online.

The Government’s counter-extremism strategy challenges extremism in all its form. Alongside the strategy, our Prevent work will continue to monitor whether extremist groups have crossed into terrorism. The group is relatively small and has been in operation in the UK for only a few years, but the impact of its activities has been felt in a number of United Kingdom communities.

Keith Vaz: In the evidence presented to the Home Secretary by the agencies before the decision was made to proscribe the group, was there any evidence of any links with other organisations in different parts of Europe? We have seen that far-right groups tend not to operate in only one country.

Mr Wallace: I cannot expand on the intelligence behind this particular decision, but I agree that we see far-right groups with a European network, and being active both here and abroad. Far right groups from abroad are active in the United Kingdom as well.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my hon. Friend tell the House whether any other groups similar to this particularly unpleasant group are near to having the same sort of decision made about them by the Government?

Mr Wallace: There are obviously other groups out there promoting hate. We keep them under review where they wander close to terrorism, and I would come straight back to this House should we gather the evidence or intelligence that meant we must do so. As I have said, other European far-right groups are active in the United Kingdom, either at other people’s rallies or through having a presence among their ethnic grouping here—the Polish far right, for example, would be active in the United Kingdom or have a branch.

Since early 2016, National Action has become more active, and its activities and propaganda material have crossed the threshold from extremism into terrorism. Its online propaganda material, disseminated via social media, frequently features extremely violent imagery and language, and condones and glorifies those who have used extreme violence for political or ideological ends. This includes two tweets posted in 2016 in connection with the murder of our friend Jo Cox, which the prosecutor described as a terrorist act. One stated:

“Only 649 MPs to go.”

Another, containing a photo of Thomas Mair, reads:

“don’t let this man’s sacrifice go in vain. #Jo Cox would have filled Yorkshire with more subhumans!”

The group also disseminated an image doctored to condone and celebrate the terrorist attack on the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in July, another depicting a police officer’s throat being slit. People might have become aware of these messages who could reasonably have been expected to infer that these acts should be emulated, and therefore such propaganda amounts to the unlawful glorification of terrorism. The Orlando massacre was an atrocity in which 49 people lost their lives. Jo Cox’s murder was a tragedy, familiar to us all, and closer to home. Both are examples of attacks committed for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause, and both were terrorist attacks. If we allow such events to be celebrated and encouraged, we live with the risk that they will be repeated.

Our strategy to combat terrorism looks at the full spectrum of activity, and that includes ensuring that groups that unlawfully glorify horrific terrorist acts are prevented from continuing to stir up hatred and encourage violence. It is right that we add National Action to the list of proscribed organisations in schedule 2 to the Terrorism Act 2000. Subject to the agreement of the House and the other place, the order will come into force on Friday 16 December.

7.26 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Opposition welcome this order proscribing the new Nazi group National Action and give it our full support. We have heard from the Minister and others on both sides of the House about some of its appalling actions and propaganda, whether Nazi salutes in Liverpool or online communications glorifying the killing of our late colleague Jo Cox.

Terrorism has become the scourge of society, but we cannot give an inch to this plague of our time. Our swift action in proscribing this far-right group will provide some reassurance to all parts of the community in these increasingly difficult and unstable times. This week, I visited the Metropolitan police’s counter-terrorism unit and saw at first hand the difficult work it does to detect terror threats. It was clear that in an increasingly digital age, ideology has become more extreme and more pervasive, and that digital technology is the key recruitment tool for terrorism. We can only imagine the effect it can have on some impressionable young people sitting in their bedrooms and seeing the online propaganda put out by such groups. That is why proscription is so important.

Because of the advances in technology and the changes in our media, specifically social media, terrorist ideology has become a cancer. We need to remain vigilant, faster, smarter and swifter in dealing with the threat. It is completely right, therefore, that we take this action. As we look forward to 2017, the major threats we face are asymmetric—a couple of young men in their bedroom can wreak terror in their community—international and deadly, and they are so rapidly changing that we could not in the House have foreseen them a decade ago. This far-right group is a genuine threat to our domestic security, and Parliament’s legislation must reflect the urgency and complexity of the situation.

7.28 pm

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): We in the SNP support this organisation’s being added to the proscribed list. I struggle to say its name in the
House, for risk of glorifying it, so I will refer to it as NA. Issues of national security are of course reserved to this place, but there has been close co-operation between the Scottish Government and the UK Government, and that will continue. It is our desire in Scotland, as much as in the rest of the UK, to do everything possible to meet the threat of terrorism.

On the basis of the tweets alone about our departed and much loved colleague Jo Cox, which will have disgusted anybody with a sense of reasonable objectivity, as well as the appalling words it put out about the terrible attack in Orlando, we have no hesitation in backing the Government’s call to add this organisation to the proscribed list. Of courses, all additions to the proscribed list must be necessary and proportionate. We must always have those two criteria and qualifications in mind, and we believe it is abundantly clear that they are met in this case.

We came to the House a couple of months ago to add another four or five organisations to the proscribed list, which was successfully done with our support. When we debated that statutory instrument, the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who is not in his place today, and I called on the then Minister, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), to contact the British Broadcasting Corporation to see whether it would desist from using the phrases “so-called Islamic State” and “Islamic State” when referring to the organisation that the Government now rightly call Daesh. The Minister gave clear commitments to contact the BBC and make those representations, but I must admit that in my very occasional watching of BBC News, I have noticed that the phrase continues to be used, perhaps more than ever. I therefore respectfully ask the Minister today, for whom I have great respect, whether he will take that suggestion away, perhaps talk to the previous incumbent, and contact the BBC so that it stops using this awful phrase, which frankly gives legitimacy to an organisation that is neither Islamic nor a state.

7.31 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I along with others in the House completely support the Minister’s decision to proscribe this organisation. Ministers obviously have important and sensitive information that they are unwilling to share with the House on such occasions, but the Minister has gone a long way to reassure the House that the information he has is more than sufficient to take the action he is proposing today.

National Action will be the first extreme right-wing organisation to be banned, which is a very welcome step. We certainly need to be very strong in dealing with right-wing extremism and we need to be very concerned about it. I raised the issue of what was happening in Europe. The world can never forget the 77 victims of Anders Breivik in 2011. The Minister mentioned the words of the organisation in question when it praised the killer of our colleague Jo Cox. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) was right to remind us of what the Home Secretary said only this week: that this group has no place in our country.

The shadow Home Secretary—for whom I have enormous respect and who has campaigned all her political life against right-wing extremism and extremism of any kind—has visited the counter-terrorism unit, as she said. I am sure she will join me and the rest of the House in praising those who are part of that unit, who day after day, day and night, work so hard to keep us safe. Under the incredible leadership of Mark Rowley, they ensure that many of the plots that we do not know about are dealt with and prevented before they come to fruition. Mark Rowley has recognised that increasing numbers in the United Kingdom are “gravitating towards extremism” and has talked about 60 to 70 cases each month. This is a very large figure indeed.

It is important to recognise what has happened since the referendum this year. The number of hate crimes, especially against Polish and other eastern European citizens, has increased by 41% since 2015.

Luciana Berger: I note what my right hon. Friend has said about the number of people of concern. Does he share my concern that the latest figures from Prevent show that around 300 young people under the age of 18 have been identified as posing a threat of extremism from the far right? That figure should concern us all and should embolden the Home Office to do even more to ensure that the next generation embraces equality, not division.

Keith Vaz: I am astonished at those figures, but I think they are witness to what the shadow Home Secretary has said about access to the internet and social media. Individuals who may be very young could be operating from their homes, involving themselves in this kind of hatred. It is very easy to disseminate hatred, as my hon. Friend will know—she has been one of the victims in this House of hatred coming from social media and the internet. She has behaved with absolute dignity in the face of it. She is right to raise these figures. These are issues of enormous concern. The younger the people who get involved in these activities, the more difficult it becomes to turn them around once they become ingrained with them. There has also been a spike in anti-Semitic incidents across the country—11% higher than last year. We should thank the police and the counter-terrorism unit for the work they do in trying to combat this.

Oddly, just before this particular debate, the House unanimously endorsed without any debate the Government’s decision to opt into Europol—one of the very few organisations in Europe that we are joining at the same time as we are leaving the rest of the EU. Europol has an extremely important role to play in ensuring that we combat far-right extremism and extremism in general all over Europe. It has an amazing head in Rob Wainwright, who is a Brit, and it is able, through the capacity that we have helped to build as part of Europol, to ensure that we deal with these organisations.

I end by asking the Minister the question I asked a little earlier, as I think he may have misunderstood it. I asked how many organisations had been deproscribed since July. I think the People’s Mujaheddin were deproscribed several years ago—not since July. The Minister is right to prescribe that we should keep on monitoring the deproscription process. On numerous occasions when these orders have been discussed, I have raised the situation of the LTTE—Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam—and my Tamil constituents, who still feel stigmatised by the fact that the LTTE is banned, even though it no longer exists. We need to be very aware of
the need to look at the issue of de-proscription and keep it under review, while of course welcoming what the Minister has done.

The independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, David Anderson, had made it very clear that he thinks there should be a time limit. In the case of this particular organisation, I think we are all agreed that the Minister has come to this House and made a powerful case. The House will speak with one voice in supporting what he has done absolutely. We look forward to this organisation being monitored very carefully indeed, so that none of its evil tentacles are passed on to other organisations, perhaps bearing a different name, but with the same personnel involved, who will seek to poison and destroy the minds of the people of this country.

7.38 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I am very pleased that we are having this debate today, but I am surprised and a little disappointed that we did not have it earlier. In the wake of Jo’s murder, the entire media coverage was dominated by issues about Thomas Mair’s mental health and the idea that he was a lone wolf. It was exactly the same after the atrocities committed by Anders Breivik. We should compare and contrast that with when Muslims commit terrorist atrocities, and the entire public discourse is about the ideology that motivated them to commit those horrendous crimes. There are demands for Muslim leaders to condemn and apologise on their behalf. Yet here we are, six months after Jo’s murder, and only now are we debating the extremist perverted ideology that inspired Thomas Mair to commit his horrific crime.

Mr Wallace: It was felt that bringing this proscription forward earlier could have jeopardised a fair trial. To avoid undermining the trial of Jo Cox’s murderer, it was best to delay to ensure that the trial was completed, given the murderer’s link to far-right groups and far-right ideology.

Louise Haigh: I am grateful to the Minister for that intervention. I was by no means criticising the Government when I mentioned the delay in bringing the proscription forward; my comment was more about the media’s treatment of this atrocity and the general public discourse. I wholeheartedly support the Government’s intention today and welcome the proscription of National Action. It is clearly a terrorist organisation, and I note that it changed its slogan in the wake of Jo’s murder to “Death to traitors, freedom for Britain!”, in the light of Thomas Mair’s plea to commit his horrific crime.

I also want to take this opportunity to call on the Government to give time to debate the proscription of Britain First. I called for such a debate last month. I did not call for Britain First’s proscription; I just called for the House to be given evidence and to look at the details of the group’s paramilitary activity and anti-democratic behaviour. As a result of that and of how the media covered my call, I have received very explicit death threats. I have been called a traitor and a Muslim-lover. On Friday, an individual went through every one of my YouTube videos and said he would not rest until I was murdered. If that is not evidence that Britain First should be proscribed as a terrorist organisation, I am not sure what is. I hope that the Minister will consider seeking time in the House to debate just that.

7.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is important that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) knows that everyone in the House stands with her. The Minister will say that at the end, but it is important that hon. Lady knows that we stand shoulder to shoulder with her.

I come from Northern Ireland, where we have great knowledge and understanding of the Terrorism Act 2000. I thank the Minister for his work in proscribing membership of National Action, which has been labelled by the media as a neo-Nazi group. Members of what is commonly known as a racist, homophobic and anti-Semitic group will now understand that it is illegal to be a part of it and will have to question why it has been made illegal.

I agree with the Minister’s decision to ensure that the group is proscribed and see it as a cog in the wheels of ensuring that while people are entitled to their own politics such opinions are viewed as warped and can never and should never be expressed in the way this group has expressed them thus far. The vile way in which the murder of our colleague Jo Cox was touted by the group says a lot about its warped, demented ideology.

Without disclosing anything that he should not disclose, will the Minister tell us what is being done to monitor other far-right groups that skirt the limits of the law but are close to stepping over the line and working towards evil ends?

I caution Members that proscribing an organisation unfortunately does not signify the end of the group. I only wish that it did, because it would be a great day for everyone in this House and further afield. Dissident Republican groups have been proscribed for many years, yet there were 52 bomb attacks in Northern Ireland in 2015–16—the highest in years—so the fears are real. Only this week, I raised that matter at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and asked representatives from the Police Service of Northern Ireland about the relationship that dissident Republicans have with international terrorism in the middle east and north Africa, which are awash with explosives and guns. Dissident Republicans have access to Semtex and the threat to mainland GB is serious, so that needs urgent attention.

It is wonderful that the Minister has stated that this behaviour will not be tolerated, but the Home Office must make available the resources that put the teeth into this legislation—counter-terrorism-trained officers who can gather intelligence and do the business to keep us safe in this House and our constituents safe across the whole of this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, not simply from this group, but the other 70 groups that have been proscribed under this Act and the further 14 groups that were proscribed before the enactment of legislation in Northern Ireland. This is a watch list of the lowest of the low and those who threaten the very democratic process that we are privileged to be part of. The Police Service of Northern Ireland and the police service in Great Britain must have the resources to contain the threat that exists, making it necessary to proscribe these organisations.

I very much welcome the Minister’s statement here tonight, but I also encourage a greater allocation of resources to deal with the threat, and to keep people safe and able to carry on with their lives—we have a responsibility in this House to ensure that.
Mr Wallace: As I said at the outset, the Home Secretary and I strongly believe that National Action should be added to the list of proscribed organisations in schedule 2 to the 2000 Act. I am grateful for the contributions from right hon. and hon. Members to this short debate. I am grateful to the Labour party and the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) for their support, and I can assure her that we will continue to do all we can to monitor people who pose a risk, and want to link violence to their cause and to inspire hatred on whatever part of the spectrum it may be.

I am grateful for the support of the Scottish National party, and I can confirm that my predecessor did indeed get in touch with the BBC. I also say to the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) something that may frustrate us from time to time: the BBC is editorially independent. We both need to continue to press the case on the point he makes; the media have to be very careful with language in all these areas.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) rightly made the point that the media have a strong role to play. We did not take our eye off the far right. We have been making sure we watch where these people go, and when they cross from hate speech into extolling terrorism. We have all been involved. The Prevent programme has involved a considerable number of referrals of people on the far right, but the media have for a long time chosen to focus on one section of society, sometimes too much so and at the expense of others.

The lesson from this, as I see when I go out and about around the country, is: if you do not think this applies to you area, think again. People are being radicalised and groomed, perhaps in their bedrooms, on the internet, and this knows no boundaries, be it class, background, race or religion. The ability for the internet to radicalise people and for those behind this to manipulate the internet to do that is incredible. Tragically, in today’s society we are going to have to deal with more of that, not less. I go to local authorities that clearly do not know from the job that I do how important they are to us. They are not allowed to shout support, and I can assure her that we will give them to tackle the threat.

What we have seen with the far right is that there are parts of this country where it is successfully recruiting people and they are part of that Prevent programme. The good news is what can happen when they get into touch with the BBC. I also say to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) mentioned the Channel referrals. I spoke to someone in the north of England recently who had referred a 15-year-old to that programme. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree made about the internet are absolutely right. We use the counter-terrorism internet referral unit to work with internet providers to remove material as it comes online, and since 2010 they have removed 220,000 pieces of terrorist-related material online. That work is ongoing and constant, and we must make sure we do it.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) does not need lessons from me on Northern Ireland-related terrorism, as the people involved have not gone away and it is still an active problem that we are trying to deal with. I am afraid that they have moved with the times and used many of the smooth, slick recruitment materials that we see across the board.

I am grateful to the House for its support. We should also take this opportunity to remember that some people will not be celebrating Christmas this year. Some of our security services and police will be on duty keeping us safe while we are having our breaks at home. They will be making sure that hon. Members in this House who are under threat and the wider public are protected. I want to place it on the record that we greatly appreciate the work that they do. They are not allowed to shout about it. They get almost no recognition in public. I know from the job that I do how important they are to keeping us safe. Proscription is one of the measures that we can give them to tackle the threat.

Proscription is not targeted at any particular faith, social group or ideological motivation. It is based on clear evidence that an organisation is involved in terrorism. It is my firm opinion and that of the Home Secretary that, on the basis of available evidence, National Action has promoted and encouraged acts of terrorism. This includes the unlawful glorification of the murder of Jo Cox, committed by Thomas Mair, and the unlawful glorification of the massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. It is therefore appropriate for the Home Secretary to exercise her discretion to proscribe this group. The proscription of this group demonstrates our condemnation of its activities. Proscribing it will also enable the police to carry out disruptive action and ensure that it cannot operate here. It will prevent National Action’s membership growing, or help to stop those who might be vulnerable to radicalisation and possibly at risk of emulating terrorist attacks. Being drawn into the group’s extreme and distorted ideology is what we are trying to stop. Therefore, I commend this order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Functions and Amendment) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 21 November, be approved.—(Mark Spencer.)

Question agreed to.

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

LEGAL SERVICES

That the draft Legal Services Act 2007 (Claims Management Complaints) (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 17 November, be approved.—(Mark Spencer.)

Question agreed to.
PETITION
Baverstock Academy

7.51 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of more than 1,500 residents of my constituency of Selly Oak, including a great many parents who live in Druids Heath, protesting at the threat and closure of their only secondary school, Baverstock Academy. Whatever the problems at Baverstock, they are not the fault of the pupils or the parents, and they should not be punished for the failings of others by losing their only secondary school.

The petition states:
The Petition of residents of Birmingham Selly Oak constituency, Declares that Baverstock Academy should not be closed.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take action to save Baverstock Academy. And the petitioners remain, etc.

[001999]
shares for a significant period. In 1998, just a third of shares were owned by non-UK investors, but now the vast majority are owned by such investors. In fact, it is almost absurd to talk about shareholders as investors, as most do not hold the shares for long—some hold them for just seconds. The figures are contested, but the most reliable ones that I have seen suggest that the average holding period has fallen from eight years in the 1960s to just four months, and as much as 70% of trades are high frequency.

The equity chain is grossly over-intermediated, meaning that those with skin in the game in the same have little or no involvement in the company at the other end of the chain. Investors tend to own only about 3% of a company at any given time. The notion that that fragmented group will clamp down on executive remuneration, or is interested in the voice of workers or the long-term contribution of the company to the communities that it serves, is either naive or disingenuous.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way in a speech on an important issue. Does she agree that the Government’s social responsibility does not lie simply in assessing how much GDP goes on benefits? It should be a living, breathing policy that takes account of the changing needs of the communities that the hon. Lady has discussed, rather than a document that is assessed at Budget time. Does she further agree that the previous Government’s big society ideal was never given the resources that it should have been given to take off? That should be considered and, indeed, reviewed.

Louise Haigh: I completely agree with those sentiments. Corporate responsibility is too often tackled on at the end of a company’s activities, in a completely separate report. It is not embedded throughout the organisation as it should be, which is why a strong, effective governance regime is vital to ensure that companies respect the communities in which they operate, the environment and their social impact.

At ASOS, despite the shocking evidence with which it was presented of mistreatment of its workforce, investors went ahead and backed the bumper pay package for executives. Why rock the boat when investors are getting their return? Since advisory votes on executive pay came into force, CEO pay has continued to climb to obscene levels, and the average vote in favour of remuneration packages has been a shocking 93%. The Kay review, commissioned by the coalition Government, which presented a fantastic analysis of the issues but fell disappointingly short on recommendations, said that “the pursuit of shareholder value has distorted corporate principles”.

Rather than push against that open door, the Government seem intent on clinging to an outdated and inappropriate model that puts the interests of international shareholders above all else—above the interests of the workforce, of stakeholders, of supply chains and of the wider community. It does not make economic sense and it is deeply unpatriotic.

Yes, the shares in UK plc may rise and international investors will have their red letter day. What good is that if workers and communities here in this country do not feel the benefit? The Government cling to a model that says that hedge funds on Wall Street are more important, and should have a greater say over the direction of a UK company, than the workers whose mortgages, pensions and livelihoods are dependent on the success of that business. Rather than having a stake in the community, investors are increasingly coming to resemble buy-to-let landlords, skimming off profits with little interest in the community at large, yet they hold all the cards.

As the Bank of England’s Andy Haldane has said, if shareholders hold all the power, “we might expect high distribution of profits to this cohort, at the expense of ploughing back these profits... or distributing them to workers”.

That is exactly what we have seen. Wealth for the 1% has grown unchecked while wages for the rest have stagnated.

It is not without reason that research and development spend in countries like our own is so low when the focus of investors and directors alike is on maximising the value of shares. That is why we need change. Our companies must look closer to home and above all to their employees, their supply chains and their communities, and give the people they rely on a stake. British workers create the wealth, the services and the products from which shareholders earn their reward. We should give them real influence in the businesses that they work for. We must modernise company law to correct the absurdity that denies employees a say but gives power to hedge funds.

If we give powerful voting rights to overseas investors who speculate in the shares of our major employers, it is right to give the programmer, the secretary, the driver or the picker who works for those businesses some power too. It is not about one or the other. It is about giving employees an equal stake. Having grappled with these issues in practice myself, I know that the big issue is that the more directors are accountable to increasingly anonymous investors, the more our top businesses end up being accountable to no one at all.

Preparing for today’s debate, I was reminded that Keynes wrote that bad ideas die slowly. He also wrote: “Practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.”

I am not pretending that reform in this area is easy. If we are honest, the reforms to fiduciary duties by the last Labour Government have had little impact, given that conservative legal advice invariably prejudices short-term shareholder interests. That is why transparency has to be at the heart of any reform. Large companies should report qualitatively on their impact on their communities, their environment and their workers, in the interest not merely of corporate accountability but of good management.

Reforms to section 172 of the Companies Act 2006 will inevitably be an important part of that. The Financial Reporting Council made the point that more focused reporting on exactly how companies are complying with the various elements of section 172 is crucial. That may very well have to become a requirement, as surveys suggest that a large number of shareholders are not aware of the very section on which it is their duty to hold directors to account.

Today Mark Carney supported better reporting on climate change risk, which is undeniably material for a growing number of sectors. However, I have real concerns
about how effective section 172 is. After all, it was introduced back in 2006 and since then we have seen some extreme examples of corporate excess and recklessness that have brought the economy to its knees and led to a bail-out of such astonishing proportions that we will still be paying for it for decades to come. Section 172 has been in force for more than 10 years, and in that time a director has had to have regard to the interests of the company’s employees, the impact of the company’s operations on the community and the environment, and the desirability of the company maintaining a reputation for high standards of business conduct. It would be almost laughable if it were not such a desperate example of the corporate neglect which has malignied this country for decades.

Throughout that time we have lacked a regulator with teeth, yet still the FRC says that it should be incumbent on shareholders to enforce the provisions of section 172. The fact that the FRC is only now commencing its investigation into KPMG’s audit of HBOS, some nine years after the collapse and bail-out, should tell us all we need to know. There is a serious problem with the enforcement of our corporate governance regime. The Government need to go much further if they want to see meaningful change. I am not convinced by the argument that we should leave such a crucial aspect of company law to shareholders who have so consistently demonstrated little interest in it and an authority seemingly unwilling to take action.

In its current definition, the duty to promote the success of the company under section 172 is seen as serving shareholder interest. As John Kay found in his review of equity markets, with share trading playing an increasingly important role in the strategy of investors, it is not at all clear how short-term investors can support the long-term good of companies. The long-term success of a company must therefore be codified in changes to section 172.

Changes in the legal duties of directors to prioritise the long-term success of the company at large over shareholders would be a significant shift, but it is one that many voices that previously advocated only minimal change are now calling for. Employees having a statutory role at board level must also be a line in the sand. The Government must not row back on giving workers an equal stake and, with it, bringing their different priorities and fresh perspective to the boardroom. Diversity is vital in governance terms—not for moral or representative reasons, but to challenge and address what Margaret Heffernan has termed “wilful blindness”.

With that in mind, I would like to ask the Minister what proposals she has discussed and considered. Much has been said about introducing a statutory role, with a third of the board being drawn from workers, whose representatives would themselves be elected. Has the Minister considered those specific proposals? What assessment has she made of the quality of reporting on environmental, social and governance issues and the impact it has had on internalising costs? Has the Minister considered the need for advisory panels to sit alongside the board, which would draw from those directly referred to in section 172, bringing a much-needed voice to directors’ responsibilities under that section?

Surely the long-term goal has to be allowing other stakeholders an equal stake in holding the board and directors to account. The Government simply cannot afford to row back on that reform. At the heart of it is the crisis that Carney referred to: people lack a stake, and they cannot see a way to exert influence.

When I was working in the City of London, the risk taking, bonuses and pay packets were viewed as the symbol of the corporate neglect that has done so much to shake trust in big business and that played its part in bringing our economy to its knees. No doubt those things were and still are grotesque, unchecked by shareholder power and in need of urgent reform. There is a crisis of legitimacy over who governs our companies and, in turn, whose interests they act in. The Government would be wise to seize that with both hands, because we cannot ignore it any longer.

8.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing today’s debate on corporate governance and social responsibility. I know it is an area in which she has a long-standing interest and considerable expertise born of her previous career—she and I share a business background. However, I listened carefully to what she said, and I do not fully recognise the picture of corporate life she has painted, although, certainly, some of it had strong resonance.

We require no reminder of just how important it is that business is conducted in a socially responsible way. There are over 3 million businesses in the UK, from small start-ups to large established businesses with a presence across the globe. They provide employment for over 26 million people. Whether large or small, they are a critical part of our society. They are not in some way separate from it. The way businesses operate and the decisions they take have a big impact on their employees, customers and suppliers and on the communities in which they are based.

The Government have a key role in setting minimum legal standards that businesses must meet in areas such as employment and consumer protection, environmental standards, and the protection of creditors in the event of insolvency. These provide a vital underpinning for business activity; it is the corporate and legal responsibility of business to comply with that framework, and I believe the vast majority do. Where businesses fall short, they are rightly held to account.

However, corporate responsibility and the way businesses manage their impact on society go beyond simple legal compliance. If we are to achieve our objective of an economy that works for everyone, we need more businesses to aim at the high standards of responsible business practice achieved by our best companies. The Government’s role in that context is to encourage those businesses that lead in good practice and to encourage others to follow suit.

The hon. Lady mentioned diversity in senior business management and at board level. We are encouraging business-led moves towards a more diverse and inclusive culture in the top management of our biggest companies that will set a lead for others to follow. Boardrooms should mirror wider society, and businesses should make the most of all the talent they have in their diverse workforces. We are following up the success in increasing representation of women on boards of our biggest companies by working with businesses to ensure that
more talented women achieve senior executive roles. We welcomed the report last month from Sir Philip Hampton and Dame Helen Alexander, who are now pressing ahead with proposals to drive up the representation of women at senior executive level and build on the pipeline for female management and talent.

We also welcomed last month the launch of the report by Sir John Parker and his recommendations for addressing the worryingly low level of representation of black and minority ethnic directors in UK boardrooms. Half the FTSE 100 companies do not have ethnic minority representation on their board, and that is shameful. Diversity at the top of our businesses is about trust. It shows workforces that their boards are representative of them and that routes to the top are open to them. People want to believe that if they work hard they too can get there, whatever their background.

As the hon. Lady reminded the House, the Government have recently published a Green Paper on corporate governance reform in which we are exploring options for strengthening aspects of our corporate governance framework. The UK has a good reputation for corporate governance that combines high standards with low burdens, but this reputation can be maintained only if Government and business review and upgrade those standards from time to time. She mentioned several recent reports on corporate governance, which followed landmark reports by Cadbury, Greenbury and Hampel in the 1990s.

The Green Paper invites views on three main areas. First, it asks for views on options to strengthen shareholder influence on executive pay, to improve the transparency of reporting on executive pay, and to strengthen the link between executive pay and long-term company performance. The hon. Lady was right to point out that the gap between rising CEO pay and corporate performance had grown too wide in recent years.

Secondly, the Green Paper asks for views on options for strengthening the connection between the boards of directors of companies and their employees, customers, and other stakeholders. All the best companies know that there are economic as well as societal benefits to be derived from maintaining strong links with interested groups. However, we need to consider what more can be done to ensure that all UK companies are equipped with an appropriate model of employee, customer, and wider engagement.

Finally, the Green Paper seeks views on whether some of the features of the corporate governance and reporting framework covering quoted companies should be extended to our largest privately held companies. Many of these companies have an economic footprint that is equal to that of listed companies. For example, there are approximately 2,500 private companies with more than 1,000 employees. In asking these questions, we want to improve the ability of UK businesses to take decisions that are informed by a wider range of views and better support long-term company performance and sustainability.

Louise Haigh: I absolutely support proposals to extend reporting to private companies, but will the Minister comment on how effective the current reporting regime is? Some businesses certainly report at an absolutely excellent level. However, I used to have the arduous and unenviable task of reading through some of these reports, and for many companies it is just a tick-box exercise. The FRC is not sufficiently resourced in terms of staff or sanctions properly to enforce the regime on companies that refuse to report properly and raise their standards, as she rightly said, to those of the businesses that are doing well in this area.

Margot James: I agree that the standard of reporting on the non-financial aspects of corporate performance is mixed and varied. One of the purposes of our Green Paper is to bring the standards of the poorer companies in terms of reporting, and indeed within other parameters, up to the standards of the best.

One option is for companies to appoint individuals to company boards to represent these stakeholder views. In the case of employees, this could be someone who works for the company—a worker representative. There is nothing in UK law to prevent unitary boards from including worker representatives as full members. Indeed, such arrangements can work well for some companies, FirstGroup plc being the best-known example. But very few UK companies have adopted it. There are undoubtedly more companies who could benefit from this approach, and the consultation period provides an opportunity for the case to be made.

Given the huge variety of UK companies, it is unrealistic to think that one size will fit all corporate requirements. For other companies a different approach to workforce engagement will work better. That is why the Green Paper makes it clear that we are not proposing to mandate the direct appointment of employees to company boards. Instead the Green Paper looks to generate a debate on the range of options that companies can choose to improve the connection between boardroom and workforce. The best companies know that there are economic benefits to be gained from understanding and maintaining healthy relationships with employees and customers. The key point is to ensure that all companies are equipped with an appropriate model of engagement to deliver a stronger voice for employees and other stakeholders in the boardroom.

The hon. Lady mentioned section 172 of the Companies Act 2006. We are not consulting on amending the wording in that section, but we are consulting on whether, and if so how, companies could provide more information on the steps that directors are taking to fulfil their duties under that section. We are also consulting on how to strengthen the connection between boardrooms and other voices, as I mentioned earlier. We would welcome comment—the hon. Lady’s views will be considered, along with those of other interested parties—on how we could get companies to report more fully on how directors are fulfilling their duties under that section.

I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for initiating this debate, which has drawn attention to the key contribution that businesses can and should make to society. It has also provided an opportunity to set out steps that the Government are taking to raise standards in responsible business practice.

Question put and agreed to.

8.17 pm

House adjourned.
Deferred Division

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Immigration Act 2014 (Current Accounts) (Excluded Accounts and Notification Requirements) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 7 November, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 297, Noes 151.

Division No. 110]

AYES

Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, Neil
Carswell, Mr Douglas
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Dijankoly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Dunne, Mr Philip
Elliot, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glenn, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Happery, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hemom, Lady
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCabe, Dr Caroline
McClelland, Dr Sarah
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Morley, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, David
Morrison, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murray, Mrs Sherryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Oford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Phillips, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Rosyton
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
| Throup, Maggie | Wallace, Mr Ben | Grady, Patrick |
| Timpson, Edward | Warburton, David | Grant, Peter |
| Tolhurst, Kelly | Warman, Matt | Gray, Neil |
| Tomlinson, Justin | Wharton, James | Green, Kate |
| Tomlinson, Michael | Whately, Heather | Greenwood, Lilian |
| Tracey, Craig | Wheeler, Heather | Greenwood, Margaret |
| Tredinnick, David | White, Chris | Griffith, Nia |
| Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie | Whittaker, Craig | Gwynne, Andrew |
| Truss, rh Elizabeth | Whittingdale, rh Mr John | Hanson, rh Mr David |
| Tugendhat, Tom | Wiggin, Bill | Hayes, Helen |
| Turner, Mr Andrew | Williams, Craig | Healey, rh John |
| Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew | Williamson, rh Gavin | Hendry, Drew |
| Vaizey, rh Mr Edward | Wilson, Mr Rob | Hodgson, Mrs Sharon |
| Vara, Mr Shailesh | Wilson, Sammy | Hopkins, Kelvin |
| Vickers, Martin | Wollaston, Dr Sarah | Howarth, rh Mr George |
| Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa | Wragg, William | Huq, Dr Rupa |
| Walker, Mr Charles | Wragg, William | Johnson, rh Alan |
| Walker, Mr Robin | Zahawi, Nadhim | Johnson, Diana |
| | | Kane, Mike |
| | | Kerevan, George |
| | | Kerr, Calum |
| | | Kinnock, Stephen |
| | | Kyle, Peter |
| | | Lammy, rh Mr David |
| | | Law, Chris |
| | | Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma |
| | | Long Bailey, Rebecca |
| | | Lucas, Caroline |
| | | Lucas, Ian C. |
| | | MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan |
| | | MacTaggart, rh Fiona |
| | | Madders, Justin |
| | | Marsden, Gordon |
| | | Maskell, Rachael |
| | | Matheson, Christian |
| | | McCabe, Steve |
| | | McCaig, Callum |
| | | McCarthy, Kerry |
| | | McDonald, Stewart Malcolm |
| | | McDonald, Stuart C. |
| | | McInnes, Liz |
| | | Mears, Ian |
| | | Miliband, rh Edward |
| | | Monaghan, Dr Paul |
| | | Moon, Mrs Madeleine |
| | | Mullin, Roger |
| | | Murray, Ian |
| | | Onn, Melanie |
| | | Onwurah, Chi |
| | | Osamor, Kate |
| | | Oswald, Kirsten |
| | | Paterson, Steven |
| | | Phillips, Jess |
| | | Pound, Stephen |
| | | Powell, Lucy |
| | | Rayner, Angela |
| | | Rees, Christina |
| | | Ritchie, Ms Margaret |
| | | Robertson, rh Angus |
| | | Robinson, Mr Geoffrey |
| | | Saville Roberts, Liz |
| | | Sheerman, Mr Barry |
| | | Sheppard, Tommy |
| | | Sherriff, Paula |
| | | Skinner, Mr Dennis |
| | | Slaughter, Andy |
| | | Smeeth, Ruth |
| | | Smith, Angela |
| | | Smith, Jeff |
| | | Smith, Owen |
| | | Stephens, Chris |
| | | Stevens, Jo |
| | | Streeting, Wes |
| | | Stringer, Graham |
| | | Stuart, rh Ms Gisela |
| | | Thewliss, Alison |
| | | Thomas, Mr Gareth |
| | | Thompson, Owen |
| | | Timms, rh Stephen |
| | | Turner, Karl |
| | | Twigg, Derek |
| | | Twigg, Stephen |
| | | Umunna, Mr Chuka |
| | | Vaz, rh Keith |
| | | Vaz, Valerie |
| | | Weir, Mike |
| | | West, Catherine |
| | | Whitford, Dr Philippa |
| | | Wilson, Corri |
| | | Winnick, Mr David |
| | | Wishart, Pete |
| | | Wright, Mr Iain |
| | | Zeichner, Daniel |

**NOES**

Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Beckett, rh Margaret
Berger, Luciana
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blenkinop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Brabin, Tracy
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Butler, Dawn
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Cummins, Judi
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
De Piero, Gloria
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dromey, Jack
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Ferrier, Margaret
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foxglove, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gapes, Mike
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Gllidion, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwyne, Andrew
Hanson, rh Mr David
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Kane, Mike
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McInnes, Liz
Meaks, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Owen
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thompson, Owen
Timms, rh Stephen
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.
The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): Superfast broadband is now available to over 90% of homes and businesses in the UK—up from 45% in 2010—and is on track to reach 95% by the end of 2017. After that, we are bringing in a universal service obligation in the Digital Economy Bill.

Stephen Gethins: The Minister will be aware that rural communities such as those in North East Fife, and small businesses in particular, rely on broadband, and there are concerns that the current plans do not go far enough. Are there any plans to extend them further so that we can get faster speeds in rural communities?

Matt Hancock: Yes. The plan to bring in a universal service obligation means just that: it is about making sure that superfast broadband is available to all. If the SNP joined us in the Lobby to support the Digital Economy Bill, which is currently passing through its remaining stages in the other place, we would be very grateful.

Peter Aldous: Superfast broadband is available across much of Waveney, but not spots remain, particularly in rural areas. The roll-out of 5G could play an important role in plugging those gaps. I would be grateful if the Minister outlined his plans to fast-track this provision. Will he consider some pilots in the Waveney area?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is a ceaseless champion of better connectivity in Lowestoft and throughout Suffolk. Connectivity is improving: there is a licence obligation to cover 90% of the UK landmass by the end of next year. I am sure he will keep fighting for his constituents to make sure that they get a better signal. The £1 billion announced in the autumn statement will help to get us there.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Access to broadband is an issue not just for rural areas, but for areas such as Dinnington village, which lies on the edge of my constituency, and for new-build housing areas such as Newcastle Great Park, where capacity simply cannot keep up with demand for this vital service. How will the Government speed up delivery to such areas?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady asks a very good question. By 1 January—less than one month away—it will be a legal requirement to put superfast broadband into new housing developments. By the end of the programme that is under way, 98% of Newcastle, which includes her constituency, will be covered for access to superfast broadband. I am sure she would want to welcome that.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Percentages do not mean much to people who do not have broadband, and we just do not have it in many parts of my constituency. This affects not only residents, but businesses, such as the caravan parks that people will not now come to unless there is broadband access. That is the problem.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is dead right that that is a problem. The universal service obligation is very important in making sure that everybody gets decent access to broadband. In the past few years, that has changed from a “nice to have” to an absolute “must have”, and we are delivering to make sure people have the connectivity they need.

British Film Industry

Neil Carmichael: The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): The UK film industry is a great success story, contributing more than £4 billion a year to the economy and supporting nearly 70,000 full-time jobs. Last year, the Government invested £340 million through film tax relief, and nearly £70 million in grant in aid and national lottery funding through the British Film Institute.

Neil Carmichael: Like many of our creative industries, the British film industry is a fabulous success story. What plans does the Secretary of State have to make sure that it will still be an industry to celebrate post-Brexit, and will she be contributing to February’s White Paper on the future negotiations?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the success of the UK film industry. I am sure that many right hon. and hon. Members are planning over Christmas to enjoy the new “Star Wars” film, which was made in Britain. Last week, I was in China to sign a co-production treaty, making us only the second country in the world to have both film and TV treaties with the Chinese. That is important because this is a
global industry—it relies not merely on the other 27 member states of the European Union, but on the whole world—and I want to make sure that it continues to be a success.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I was born in the shadow of Shepperton film studios and have long had links with the film industry, so may I urge the Secretary of State to do something about getting more apprentices into the film sector? Our great directors and many of our great actors left school at 14 or 15 and did apprenticeships. Today, too many people at the top are not very creative, because they all went to Eton. Will she do something about getting ordinary kids into the film industry again?

Karen Bradley: I am incredibly proud of the creativity of all our young people, no matter which school they went to. Perhaps that was an audition by the hon. Gentleman, given his close links to film. He rightly identifies that there are issues with apprenticeships in the film industry because of the business model in that industry, and particularly because there are so many freelancers and shorter-term contracts. We are working with the Department for Education to make sure we have the right apprenticeships so that young people can get the skills they need to succeed in the global success that is the British film industry.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): With part of “Les Misérables” filmed at Boughton House near Kettering and Keira Knightley’s “Pride & Prejudice” filmed at Weekley village just outside the town, what more are the Government doing to encourage filmmakers to use historic sites in the great British countryside for their films?

Karen Bradley: I want to see the great British countryside used as the location for great British films. It is fantastic that Kettering has been such a hotbed. I am pleased that a number of films have been made in the Peak district, including in the Staffordshire moorlands. I want to see more of them; they are very welcome.

Mr Speaker: Surely the decision for the filming to take place in the constituency of the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) was quite deliberate, on account of his prodigious efforts.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Northern Ireland’s film commission, Northern Ireland Screen, has invested some £14 million in the US cable network to enable “Game of Thrones” to be delivered, and some £115 million has come back into the economy of Northern Ireland as a result. Industry-wide speculation certainly brings great accumulation. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure that the Northern Ireland film commission brings even more business into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: “Game of Thrones” is another fantastic example of a global franchise that is made in the United Kingdom, this time in Northern Ireland. That is something we are incredibly proud of and we need to make sure that there is as much support as possible. I continue to work with colleagues across all the devolved nations to ensure that film companies understand the diverse breadth of opportunities in the whole United Kingdom.

Sexual Abuse in Sport

3. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to deal with historical allegations of child abuse in sport. [907914]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): The Government take these matters very seriously. Yesterday, I co-chaired a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to ensure that sports are able to deal effectively with allegations of non-recent abuse and have the most robust possible child protection processes in place today.

Sir Henry Bellingham: The allegations that are under investigation, which involve more than 100 clubs, are truly shocking, but does the Secretary of State agree that the vast majority of coaches and volunteers in local sports clubs play a crucial role in our constituencies? Does she also agree that it is vital that we do not put off or discourage potential volunteers who would never dream of betraying the trust that was placed in them?

Karen Bradley: I agree with my hon. Friend. We want to ensure that parents and young people have the confidence to participate in sport. We need to know what happened. We need to make sure that the victims come forward, that the police have time to carry out the investigations and that there is confidence in the system. The roundtable that I co-chaired yesterday was incredibly helpful in flushing out where we can do more, because we can always do more, and in giving reassurance that much is being done.

11. [907925] Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure that we are all appalled by the allegations of horrific abuse that have come out in recent weeks, which have besmirched the game that many of us love so much. We are aware of the helpline that is available so that people can phone up and relate what happened to them. Has the Secretary of State had conversations with the football authorities about what more can be done proactively to identify people who had contact with the abusers in the past and assist them in every way to make the difficult decision to come forward and relate what happened to them?

Karen Bradley: I confirm that I have had exactly those conversations with the Football Association, the premier league, the English football league and the Professional Footballers Association to make sure that we are identifying people who may have been victims, but who have not yet had the confidence to come forward.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that there should be a mandatory requirement for the reporting of known or suspected abuse for everyone who works in regulated activities, including sport?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend will know that the Department for Education and the Home Office have carried out a joint consultation on mandatory reporting.
I understand that the responses are being considered at the moment and that a response will be forthcoming shortly.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): My contempt is reserved almost solely for the predators and abusers who carried out the crimes rather than the institutions, but the Secretary of State is right that there has to be a reflection on what went wrong and how we can maximise the robustness of safeguarding. Which individual sporting bodies has she met recently to have those discussions?

**Karen Bradley**: I do not wish to detain the House with a long list, so perhaps it would be helpful if I wrote to the hon. Gentleman with the full list of the bodies that my hon. Friend the sports Minister and I have spoken to.

**Mr Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover) (Lab): Is it not remarkable that the people who are making statements went to football clubs among the 92 teams in the football leagues of Britain, whereas most people like me, working at the pit, were coached at the miners’ welfare, and nobody who helped at the 700 miners’ welfares all over Britain has been brought forward? The truth is that it is about the money as well. When the Government are digging into this, they should remember that there is a class argument about it. It is about people making money, and the Tories know a lot about that.

**Karen Bradley**: I am sorry, but I do not think that trying to bring party politics into the matters is at all appropriate. Vulnerable young people have been abused by predatory individuals from all walks of life. Even suggesting that party politics is involved belittles the House.

**Football Association: Governance**

4. **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Football Association on its governance arrangements.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch)**: You will be unsurprised, Mr Speaker, to learn that I have had several discussions with the Football Association on this subject. As recently as Monday, I spoke to the chairman, Greg Clarke, and I was clear that I wanted reform and that the clear mechanism for achieving that is through compliance with the new code of governance for sport, which was published in October.

**Ian C. Lucas**: I have always been a great admirer of the Minister’s optimism, especially when we played on the same five-a-side team. Unfortunately, her optimism about the future of the FA is not shared by three of its previous chairmen, who said earlier this week that legislation was needed to address the deficiencies in the organisation. Will she therefore give an undertaking that, before the end of April, she will come to the House either to announce her agreement with the FA about future governance arrangements, or with proposals for legislation?

**Tracey Crouch**: On the five-a-side pitch, it was never optimism, just skill.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that I take this matter incredibly seriously. We believe that the FA has heard the warnings from all parts of the House and all levels in Parliament that it needs to reform quickly. We strongly believe that the incentive of removing public funding will achieve that. I would be happy to update the House on progress in April.

**Channel 4**

5. **Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): When she plans to make an announcement on the future status of Channel 4.

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock)**: We will make an announcement on the future status of Channel 4 in due course.

**Ian Murray**: The Minister knows that Channel 4 not only supports a thriving independent production sector through commissioning, but has proven time and again to be a sustainable and successful business model. We know that the Government like to create uncertainty, but will the Minister take it away from Channel 4, its advertisers and the independent production companies that it supports, and make a decision which has been delayed for far too long?

**Matt Hancock**: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, we are looking at all the options to ensure that we have a strong and sustainable future for Channel 4. I am a great supporter of Channel 4. A Conservative Government in the 1980s put it in place, and we will do what is necessary to sustain its future.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): I am completely open-minded about the ownership of Channel 4 as long as we ensure that the programming standards are maintained, but may I remind my right hon. Friend that ITV, Sky and many others produce great documentaries and wonderful dramas, and they are privately owned?

**Matt Hancock**: Of course that is an important thing to remember. We are looking at how we can have the most sustainable, vibrant future for our brilliant Channel 4.

**Mr David Lammy** (Tottenham) (Lab): Is the Minister comfortable with the fact that currently Channel 4 has no one from a diverse background on its board, and will he explain the process by which he or the Secretary of State made a decision that excluded the deputy chief executive of the Arts Council from that board?

**Matt Hancock**: We have recently made some appointments to the Channel 4 board. Those appointments were all made on merit. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that public appointments must be made on merit, and give him this statistic: since this team has been in place in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 24% of all public appointments have gone to people from minority ethnic backgrounds—which is far higher than the proportion in the economy. We are passionately devoted to making sure that our great institutions are represented by people from all backgrounds, and will continue to do that, based on merit.
Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) is absolutely right that Channel 4 is not diverse, so will the Minister make sure that there are not as many politically correct left wingers at Channel 4 in the interests of diversity? As he does so, will he set out why it is in the taxpayers’ interest for the Government to own a left-wing broadcaster?

Matt Hancock: Of course, Channel 4 pays its way and pays for itself—it is not subsidised; it is just owned by the taxpayer. I am sure, with contributions such as that, my hon. Friend will bring great insight and entertainment to the Women and Equalities Committee.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Minister talks of merit. Channel 4 has 13 board members. Ten of them are men. All of them are white. Will he explain to the House why he and the Secretary of State blocked the sole black candidate, who was described as outstanding by Ofcom?

Matt Hancock: In this case, there were four vacancies and we chose the four best candidates. I will have no truck with the argument that we should have tokenism. I support appointment on merit. I also support making sure that we reach into all communities. The fact that this ministerial team has appointed 24% of people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds demonstrates how much we care about—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are not as slow as all that.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I am afraid that the Minister’s laconic attitude towards this is not helpful at all. He has just said that the appointments were made on merit and that had he gone through with the recommended appointment it would have been an example of tokenism. That is an absolute insult to the candidate, who, as he well knows, was perfectly well qualified and recommended for appointment on merit.

When are we going to get an end to the uncertainty about Channel 4? The Secretary of State has been in place for 150 days. The sector is going from strength to strength. We are working closely with the industry to assess both the impacts and the opportunities that our departure presents, and I am hosting a series of round-tables with industry about that.

Deidre Brock: The Secretary of State is, I hope, aware of the concerns of the world’s biggest festival of the arts that Brexit and hostile immigration policies pose a serious threat to its ongoing success. What assurances can she give the Edinburgh festivals that they will remain truly international in a post-Brexit Britain?

Karen Bradley: I visited the Edinburgh festival this summer. It was a fantastic experience, and I loved the big signs of welcome, which were very clear that it was a global festival. The Edinburgh festival existed before the United Kingdom joined the European Union, and I want to make sure that it continues going from strength to strength in its anniversary year next year.

Topical Questions

T1. [907904] Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): Last week I visited China, along with the largest cultural delegation ever to accompany a Minister from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport abroad. We made key partnerships with Chinese travel companies, the Chinese television sector and the Beijing Winter Olympics, as well as announcing the forthcoming terracotta warriors exhibition in Liverpool.

The BBC royal charter has been approved by Her Majesty in Council, and printed and sealed. I laid copies of the royal charter and associated framework agreement in both Houses today, with an accompanying written statement.

Mr Speaker, I hope you will not mind my promoting the MP4 single—the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) is part of the band—that is supporting the Jo Cox Foundation. I hope we all download that single and get it to No. 1 for Christmas.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Craig Williams: My right hon. Friend will be aware that, under its commercial expansion through Project Lightning, Virgin Media is committed to rolling out fibre to 2 million premises across the UK, including in my constituency, thereby helping the Secretary of State to meet her vision of a fibre future. Will she clarify whether the fibre fund will be limited to areas of market failure?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend represents a constituency with 97% superfast coverage, which I am sure he welcomes. He is right to highlight our announcement in the autumn statement of additional funding to boost the UK’s digital infrastructure. We will announce further details about the fund in due course.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Happy Christmas to you and your family, Mr Speaker, and to the staff of the House.
In the light of recent data security breaches, does the Secretary of State have confidence in the operational security of the National Lottery, and that Camelot is operating within its regulatory obligations?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that we should all be very aware and alert to our cyber-security, and that we should take advice issued by cyber-security experts with regard to updating passwords and so on. I met the National Lottery and continue to work with it to ensure that it is cyber-secure.

Mr Watson: Can the Secretary of State give the House her absolute assurance that Britain’s national lottery is safe? Will she commit to come back to the Dispatch Box if there are any further revelations of security breaches at Camelot?

Karen Bradley: I repeat that I met Camelot and am working with it to ensure that it is as secure as it possibly can be, and that it takes all possible cyber-security measures. I am sure the hon. Gentleman and I will discuss these matters over the Dispatch Box. I wish him—and you, Mr Speaker—a very happy Christmas.

T3. [907906] Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The respected independent media monitoring organisation News-watch published research showing that over the past 10 years just 3% of the 4,000 people interviewed about the EU on the BBC’s “Today” programme were supporters of Brexit. Given this demonstrable bias, which since the referendum is now conflated with almost daily doom and gloom from the show’s business section, how can the licence fee payer funded BBC be held to account to deliver the impartial news service its charter requires?

Karen Bradley: I am sure my hon. Friend welcomes the charter, which sees a new regulatory regime for the BBC and includes Ofcom having regulatory responsibility, that is being laid today. I am sure he will support the Digital Economy Bill, which is making its passage through the other place, to ensure that the regulatory regime comes into force.

T2. [907905] Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): BT owns a massive 42% of the UK’s useable mobile spectrum, meaning that challenger companies suffer capacity constraints. Will the Minister ask Ofcom to include a cap considerably below 42% in the forthcoming spectrum auction?

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): Making sure we have a fully competitive mobile market is very important. Ofcom will take a view to ensure that that continues. That is in its remit. We will ensure that the spectrum is auctioned in such a way to get the broadest possible coverage.

T6. [907909] Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The National Citizen Service has done a great deal to encourage young people in north-east Lincolnshire, and in Cleethorpes in particular, to broaden their horizons. What further action is the Minister taking to promote participation in the scheme, and will he commit to visit some of the projects in Cleethorpes?

Karen Bradley: BT owns a massive 42% of the UK’s useable mobile spectrum, meaning that challenger companies suffer capacity constraints. Will the Minister ask Ofcom to include a cap considerably below 42% in the forthcoming spectrum auction?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr Rob Wilson): My hon. Friend is a big supporter of the NCS and I am sure that coastal areas face significant challenges. The NCS can and does have a significant impact on helping those areas. It is therefore great news that there is a place in the NCS for every young person who wants one. This summer alone, 285 young people in north-east Lincolnshire have taken part. Subject to my diary, I am very happy to visit the schemes in his area.

T4. [907907] Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Minister says he is considering all options on Channel 4. Does that include privatisation and part-privatisation?

Matt Hancock: We will set out our plans for the future of Channel 4 in due course.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): What possible justification is there for the Government owning both the BBC and Channel 4?

Matt Hancock: Channel 4 is not paid for but is owned by the Government. It was set up under Government ownership, but it pays for itself through its advertising, and delivers brilliantly—I think—with its remit.

T5. [907908] Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I have arranged for Sport England to attend my constituency in January to meet local sports clubs, many of which are struggling to stay afloat because of a decrease in grants and huge cuts to local authority funding. In the light of the child obesity strategy, does the Minister agree that the Government should make it a priority to engage with and promote these small sports clubs?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her initiative, and I hope that others in the House will do something similar, because getting Sport England funding involves a lot of work and paperwork. We would encourage all local sports clubs to do it, however, and I congratulate her on her initiative.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs says it is investigating 43 premier league players and 12 clubs, including, it is believed, Manchester United, for image rights tax dodging. Does the Minister agree that fans are right to be angry that big clubs and players, including England captain, Wayne Rooney, stand accused of dirtying the beautiful game with a culture of excessive greed and tax dodging?

Tracey Crouch: I agree with my hon. Friend that those in football should protect the reputation of football, but he is asking me to comment on a matter that HMRC is still investigating. Football players, clubs and managers are treated no differently from others and are expected to adhere to the same principles.

T7. [907911] Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I welcome the Government’s announcement yesterday of a review into volunteering, but will the Minister confirm that the Government will provide a full response to each of the review’s eventual recommendations, particularly on the question of the legal status of full-time volunteers?
Mr Rob Wilson: May I begin by saying how proud I am of the fantastic work already being done by the NCS and the 1 Will campaign, which is making a dramatic difference to young people and volunteering? I announced a review yesterday, and of course we will respond in detail to the report’s findings.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is widely acknowledged that the BBC is institutionally biased in favour of the EU. Will the Secretary of State explain why the BBC does not acknowledge that itself?

Karen Bradley: I repeat the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone): not only does the new charter require impartiality, but we have Ofcom to regulate that, a new unitary board with management responsibilities for the BBC and the National Audit Office looking at value for money. I think that that package of regulation and value-for-money auditing should give my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) the comfort he needs.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Will the Secretary of State speak to the BBC about the role it can play in the future of Gaelic language broadcasting? It currently spends less than 0.25% on Gaelic programming, and as a result the otherwise excellent BBC Alba is left with a 74% repeat rate.

Karen Bradley: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that this is an 11-year settlement that will guarantee Gaelic language broadcasting. I would be happy to discuss the matter further with the BBC, but I am sure that he welcomes the fact that this is a long-term sustainable settlement.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Our community libraries could be places of study and multi-media use and real community hubs. What steps will my hon. Friend take to encourage local authorities to develop our libraries so that they become such community hubs?

Mr Rob Wilson: We recently published a report, the “ambition” document, which highlighted how libraries are an important part of local communities able to act as community hubs and providing a range of activities in respect of support for reading, digital skills, culture, health, employment and learning. I urge local authorities to think innovatively and to use their libraries to deliver services to their communities so that they are sustainable and can thrive in the future.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Foreign Direct Investment

1. Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support foreign direct investment into the UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): My Department is working globally to attract foreign firms to set up or expand their businesses in the UK and to generate new jobs and contribute to national wealth creation. We are promoting the UK as a prime destination for inward investment from across our global network, with dedicated support for investors in 50 overseas markets. With the support of sector specialists, we are ensuring that the UK has the best opportunities to attract higher-quality foreign direct investment.

Craig Williams: Latest gross value added figures show that Wales is the fastest growing area outside London, and Cardiff is unabashedly the engine room of the Welsh economy. What positive steps is the Department taking to ensure that Welsh businesses and Cardiff businesses get the help they expect to get?

Mark Garnier: Let me say that my hon. Friend, given that his constituency is Cardiff North, is the engine-room of the Cardiff economy. The Department for International Trade works for the whole of the UK, but I stress that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already visited Wales, and I am working with the Wales Office to see what more we can do. We also support the Welsh Government by offering them support in posts overseas. We see the opportunities presented by Wales as very exciting.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Today we are told that it could take up to 10 years to reach a trade agreement with the EU after we leave, while research from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research suggests a drop in trade of up to 60% if we are outside the customs union. Foreign investors are vital for the British economy, so will the Minister give those investors some of the certainty they so desperately need—and that we need, as well? Will he tell them whether he wants Britain to be inside the customs union and whether he wants tariff-free access to the single market or not?

Mark Garnier: It has been made very clear that the Government are not going to give a running commentary on what we are proposing to do. I also stress that the comments of Ivan Rogers are opinions and words taken from interlocutors and do not necessarily define how long it will take to create a trade deal. It is worth bearing in mind, if we look at various trade deals around the world, that while the Trans-Pacific Partnership has taken potentially eight years, the US-Jordan trade deal took just four months. It is very difficult to establish exactly how long any trade deal will take.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): As the UK becomes a world leader in the fourth industrial revolution—new technology—will the Minister update the House on what steps his Department is taking to secure foreign direct investment in this vital new sector?

Mark Garnier: I congratulate my hon. Friend on launching the all-party parliamentary group on the fourth industrial revolution. This type of innovative approach by businesses moving forward is incredibly important to the success of this country’s economy. We are working extraordinarily hard to make sure that this innovative approach is being transmitted around the world through our posts overseas, and that we can secure foreign direct investment to support it.
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What is the Minister’s best estimate on when an EU trade deal will be completed?

Mark Garnier: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my earlier answer.

World Trade Organisation

2. Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the World Trade Organisation on the approval of new schedules for the UK after the UK has left the EU.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): I have had a number of constructive discussions with the director-general of the World Trade Organisation, Roberto Azevêdo. We have made clear to the WTO membership the UK’s intention to replicate as far as possible our current obligations in order to avoid disrupting our trading relationships or those of our trading partners across the world. The UK will need its own schedules in the WTO regardless of the nature of our future trading relationship with the EU.

Callum McCaig: Given that the list of countries offended by the Foreign Secretary grows longer by the day, what contingencies are being put in place should there be some opposition to the renegotiation of the UK schedule?

Dr Fox: The contingency that the hon. Gentleman asks for is in place, because until new schedules are negotiated and agreed, current schedules will apply. It is worth noting that the European Union itself, having failed to negotiate EU28 schedules, is still operating successfully under the EU15 of 1995.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Civitas has estimated that if we were to go to World Trade Organisation terms with the EU, EU businesses would have to pay £12 billion to access the UK market, and UK businesses will have to pay £5 billion to access the EU market. Does the Secretary of State accept those figures? If the Government do not accept them, will he tell us what the Government’s figures are?

Dr Fox: Whatever the actual figures are, there is one point that is more important—the introduction of any impediments to trade and investment in intra-European trade would be disadvantageous to producers and consumers alike. Of course, the Government have made it very clear that we will try to get maximum access to European markets in order to avoid a disruption of trade.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Are not these WTO schedules of concessions just one of many examples of the mammoth bureaucratic task that has to be conducted, and should we not be thanking our ambassador to the European Union for the reality check he has given about the decade-long period it will take to extricate ourselves from this process? Does the Secretary of State agree we should not be rushing so headlong into this timetable?

Dr Fox: Yes, we face a number of bureaucratic challenges, but the people we should be thanking are the British people for giving us such clear instructions to leave the EU.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The UK has high standards in the workplace and for its products and animal welfare. Does the Secretary of State agree that a free trade deal with zero tariffs with countries that have much lower standards could have a significant commercial disadvantage for many of our companies?

Dr Fox: The whole point of reaching an agreement is because it is beneficial to both parties, otherwise an agreement would not be reached, and regulatory and compliance standards will always be an important part of that.

Global Trade

3. Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): What steps he is taking to expand UK global trade.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): With the current slowdown in the growth of global trade, the UK must be a world leader in championing free trade worldwide and banging a drum for British business. Our measures to support UK business trading globally include a network of advisers in 109 markets, online advice at GREAT.gov.uk and support through UK Export Finance. Both myself and ministerial colleagues have continued to meet businesses in the UK and abroad, including 50 ministerial visits to 34 markets overseas.

Mr Raab: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Professor Patrick Minford has estimated that UK trade liberalisation would cut consumer prices by 8%. Does the Secretary of State agree that forging our own free trade arrangements outside the EU presents huge opportunities to ease the cost of living for low-income families?

Dr Fox: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, and he is right to highlight the potential of free trade to reduce the cost of living in this country. Free trade ensures that more people can access more goods at better value, making their incomes go further, whereas protectionism tends to hurt the poorest the most.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It has been two years since the then Environment Secretary announced with great fanfare plans to sell pigs’ trotters to China. As my written question this week revealed, we are still no closer to signing the pigs’ trotters protocol. If it takes this long to reach an agreement to sell pigs’ trotters, what does that say about our ability to make all the other trade deals we need in the wake of Brexit?

Dr Fox: I am very intent that our agricultural exports continue apace. I shall continue to push pigs’ trotters as fast as they can possibly go.
Mr Speaker: A very alluring prospect, to be accomplished by the right hon. Gentleman probably not without sweat or emotion.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Many countries are using non-tariff barriers to block global trade. However, as the Secretary of State is well aware, in countries such as Brazil we are now seeing real progress in the removal of local content regulations. What more can be done to encourage other countries to follow this example?

Dr Fox: I thank the hon. Friend for his work as our trade envoy to Brazil. I was extremely impressed in the meetings I had last week in that country that we are now seeing major attempts not only to open up markets, but to deal with endemic corruption. That corruption is one of the biggest single barriers to trade, and, as the World Bank has made clear, improved governance is a major improvement in the potential for trade.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State recently reaffirmed the Government’s target to double exports by 2020, but at the autumn statement the Office for Budget Responsibility contradicted this, stating that it expects UK trade to reduce as a result of the UK leaving the EU and the single market. So who is right: does he accept the assessment of the experts of the OBR, yes or no?

Dr Fox: I am tempted to ask the hon. Lady if she would like Santa to bring her a dictionary, because expectations and targets are not the same thing.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend seek to unblock the global trading system by adopting a new open anti-distortions agreement that can deliver free trade and self-government, fight crony capitalism at home and defend against predatory practice abroad, like the one proposed by the Legatum Institute special trade commission?

Dr Fox: I do not think I need to explain to my hon. Friend that I and my fellow Ministers have set out the case for free trade on a number of occasions. We are seeing a slowdown in the rate of global trade growth at present, which is a threat to the prosperity of people across the globe. We must have more open trade, fewer tariffs and fewer non-tariff barriers if we are to succeed in that task.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Newcastle international airport plays a vital role in the north-east’s economy, by facilitating over £300 million worth of exports every year. Like other English regional airports, however, it faces unfair competition. Will the Treasury to ensure that airports such as Newcastle can continue to play a vital role in international trade?

Mr Speaker: I can assure her that the ongoing discussions with the Treasury will be not just general but personal.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Newcastle international airport plays a vital role in the north-east’s economy, by facilitating over £300 million worth of exports every year. Like other English regional airports, however, it faces unfair competition on tax as air passenger duty is devolved to Scotland. The Government have failed to commit to mitigate that. What discussions will the Department have with the Treasury to ensure that airports such as Newcastle can continue to play a vital role in international trade?

Dr Fox: Such imbalances are an inevitable consequence of devolution, for which the hon. Lady’s party campaigned. I also have a regional airport in my constituency, and I can assure her that the ongoing discussions with the Treasury will be not just general but personal.

Mr Speaker: I call Julie Elliott. Not here.

Free Trade Agreement: USA

5. Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): What progress he has made on negotiating a free trade agreement with the USA.

Dr Fox: Such imbalances are an inevitable consequence of devolution, for which the hon. Lady’s party campaigned. I also have a regional airport in my constituency, and I can assure her that the ongoing discussions with the Treasury will be not just general but personal.
The Minister for Trade and Investment (Greg Hands): The United States is our single largest export market, accounting for £100 billion-worth of UK exports. As the Prime Minister said, the UK and US are, and will remain, strong and close partners on trade, security and defence. We cannot negotiate and conclude trade deals while we are a member of the EU, but we can discuss our current and future trading relationships. The Secretary of State for International Trade, Lord Price and I have all visited the US since taking office. We look forward to working with President-elect Donald Trump to ensure the continuing prosperity of our nations.

Mr Bone: The excellent Minister is quite correct that the USA is our biggest single export market, although we have no trade deal with it. However, the current President said that we would at the “back of the queue” when it comes to a trade deal. In the discussions that the Minister will have in the US, does he think that President-elect Trump will put us at the back or the front of the line?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is right to stress the importance of the bilateral trading relationship and the investment relationship. Every day, 1 million Britons go to work for American companies here and 1 million Americans go to work for British companies in the United States. Not only are our exports to the US very strong, but they grew by 19% in the most recent year for which data are available. Of course we look forward to developing a stronger and more open trading relationship with the new President and the new Congress.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): One of the main proponents of a future UK-US trade deal in Congress is Congressman Charlie Dent, who happens to be a very good friend of mine and of the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb). However, President-elect Trump was elected on an anti-globalisation mandate, so why does the Minister think the new President will put UK-US trade deals at the front of his agenda in a post-Brexit environment?

Greg Hands: Over the summer, I met Senator Orrin Hatch, one of the co-authors of the Congress resolution calling for a future US-UK free trade agreement. We strongly welcome the support right the way across Congress on our future trade relationship with the United States. As for the President-elect, I suggest we wait to see his actions. He did say during different campaign events:

“Trade has big benefits, and I am in favour—totally in favour—of trade...Isolation is not an option. Only great and well-crafted trade deals”.

We look forward to working with him in the future.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): What consideration has the Department given to the President-elect’s views on the Trans-Pacific Partnership?

Greg Hands: In a very general sense, the UK remains supportive of trade deals, right the way across the globe, that reduce or remove trade barriers—tariff barriers or non-tariff barriers—to help facilitate the flow of international trade.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The TPP, which has just been mentioned, and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership have been fraught with difficulties and concerns from the public, businesses and sectors. So what will the Minister do when negotiating a bilateral trade deal with the US to make sure that those issues do not derail that kind of deal?

Greg Hands: The first thing to say is that TTIP is still on the table, and we have always been clear that the rights of Governments to regulate in the public interest will still be there in all these different trade deals. As the hon. Gentleman will know, TTIP has been debated in the Commons on at least five occasions, and the views of parliamentarians have been made clear. We will make sure that there will be no reduction in regulatory standards if TTIP comes to pass.

Trading Opportunities Abroad

6. Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses in establishing future trading opportunities abroad. [907896]

8. Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses in establishing future trading opportunities abroad. [907901]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): The Department is working across the UK, as well as in both current and future export markets overseas, to help British businesses. We are helping them to export their goods and services, identify new export opportunities and win those export sales. We are doing this digitally, through the GREAT.gov.uk website, and in person, through our network of international trade advisers across the UK and through our overseas staff in 109 countries.

Wendy Morton: Businesses in my constituency do not always have the resources to explore export markets but are keen to maximise opportunities. What is the Department going to do to help those businesses, so that they can find more opportunities abroad?

Mark Garnier: May I refer my hon. Friend, who is a champion of businesses in her constituency, to the GREAT.gov.uk website? Although it has been going for only one month, 174,000 users have visited it, more than 6,000 users have already made use of our selling online overseas services and nearly 1,000 businesses have created a profile on our “Find a buyer” service. This was highlighted to all hon. Members when the Department sent out our MPs’ toolkit, so that all MPs can help their constituents to find new markets and raise their eyes to the horizon.

Sir Edward Leigh: With only 5% of businesses trading directly with the EU, surely leaving the internal market will allow us to relieve the other 95% from the shackles of over-regulation? Will the Minister say a bit about the balance his Department is going to strike between inward and outward investment?
Mark Garnier: I thank a member of the Select Committee for his very wise question. It is a new approach by this Department to look equally at overseas direct investment for businesses looking to move overseas. This is incredibly important because it provides opportunities for many businesses to create new opportunities and new markets overseas. It is worth bearing in mind that, as British businesses invest overseas, they take with them skills and expertise, which can only help those developing economies to grow, thus creating even more opportunities for British businesses in further developed markets.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will my right hon. Friend shed some light on the difference between our trade deficit with the EU and our trade deficit with the USA?

Dr Fox: I am pleased to say that we do not have a trade deficit with the US; we have a trade surplus with the US. In fact, we send £100 billion of exports to the US a year, which is 20% of our total, with a £40 billion surplus. The US is responsible for 26% of all our inward investment, and we are responsible for 23% of outward investment to the US. It is a very, very interdependent relationship.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): By insulting my wife's taste in ties, the Secretary of State must await her reprimand, but she must wait in line because there are others who wish to reprimand him. The European Scrutiny Committee told off the Secretary of State for going to Brussels and agreeing the comprehensive economic trade agreement between the EU and Canada without first bringing it to the UK Parliament for scrutiny. He undertook to the Committee that he would bring CETA for debate in this House by the end of November, a deadline that he missed. The Committee then set a more generous deadline, but that deadline expired two days ago, on 13 December. Will he tell us whether he actually believes in taking back sovereignty from Brussels—does he or does he not? If he does, repeatedly denying the UK Parliament the right to properly scrutinise such an important trade agreement is a very odd way to go about it. Will he now commit to bring a debate and a vote to the Floor of the House before the European Parliament finally votes on CETA on 2 February?

Mr Speaker: May I very gently say to the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), whom I hold in the highest esteem, that I hope, in due course, his PhD thesis will be published?

Dr Fox: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting me right. The Secretary of State for Exiting the EU said yesterday that he is considering four options for the customs union: completely inside; completely outside; the Turkish model, which is partially inside but outside the single market; and the Swiss model, which is outside but with customs arrangements. Are there enough staff in the International Trade Department and the Brexit Department to assess by February the concerns of UK businesses that leaving the customs union would devastate their complex cross-border EU supply chain by exposing new paperwork hurdles and tariffs?

Mark Garnier: The Department for International Trade is currently recruiting some of the finest people known in this country to help us to develop that. I stress to the hon. Lady that this whole exercise is not just defined by one Department or by the Department for Exiting the European Union; every Department is working to help to maximise the assistance that we can give both to British businesses and to the entire economy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Expanding UK global trade will mean that we need better connectivity within the UK. With that in mind, does the Minister agree that expanding Heathrow and adding more flights from Northern Ireland will enable more of our exporters in Northern Ireland to reach clients, particularly in new and emerging markets outside the EU?

Mark Garnier: I certainly agree that greater connectivity through airports is incredibly important for the whole country. However, I must stress that the details for such arrangements are for Ministers in the Department for Transport, so perhaps I can refer the hon. Gentleman to them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am very conscious that the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) had her question transferred to another Department, and I am sensitive to her plight. If she wishes to give the House the benefit of her thoughts, doubtless she will bob up and down during topical questions and we will all be grateful for that.

Topical Questions

T1. [907881] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Department for International Trade has three tasks: promoting UK exports to support a growing economy that serves the whole country; maximising opportunities for wealth creation through overseas direct investment to support the current account; and negotiating the best international trading framework for the UK outside the EU. Like the UK, my Department is open for business.

T2. [907882] James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Over the past five years, South Korea has been our second fastest growing trading partner. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should seek to boost trade with South Korea further still until we leave the EU and, after we leave the EU, enter a prompt bilateral trade deal with South Korea, which its Government would welcome?
The Minister for Trade and Investment (Greg Hands): I know that my hon. Friend takes a huge interest in Korea and his Korean community in Kingston. He knows that I visited Seoul, as did Lord Price, in September and saw for myself what natural allies we will be in the global future of free trade. I had excellent meetings with Samsung and with other interlocutors. We look forward to working very closely with South Korea in the future in developing free trading relationships, and I will make sure that my hon. Friend is very involved.

Dr Fox: The Government take very seriously their environmental obligations and will continue to do so.

T3. [907883] Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Recently, the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) said in relation to emissions standards that what is good enough for India is good enough for us. May we have a firm assurance that no emissions standards will be watered down as part of any free trade deal?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): My hon. Friend is right. We have an extraordinarily good relationship with Israel, and we are the second biggest export market for Israel. Currently, we are governed by the association agreement that the EU has with Israel, and we are certainly keen to engage with Israel to make sure that in a post-Brexit world there is no disruption to the trade that we have.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State is delighted to be back in the Cabinet, but does he agree that the 1 million jobs that will be put at risk if we leave the customs union matter more than his own career?

Dr Fox: I repeat that the Government have made no decision yet in relation to the discussions and negotiations that we will have with the European Union. We have made no decision yet on the customs union. That will be part of the ongoing discussion and the Government will make decisions based on evidence.

T5. [907885] Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What action is my right hon. Friend taking to promote our world-class science base around the globe? Will he confirm that he recognises that face-to-face collaboration is an important part of that continued success, and that we need to attract the best and the brightest to do their research here?

Greg Hands: I commend my hon. Friend on his work as Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee. As he will know, I was in his constituency on Friday looking at some technological innovation at DP World’s fantastic port facilities at the London Gateway. The UK has a long-established system that supports and therefore attracts the brightest minds at all stages of their careers. We will make sure that Britain is the global go-to nation for scientists, innovators and tech investors.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): What steps is the Minister taking to include human rights expertise on UK trade delegations?

Greg Hands: If I understood the hon. Lady’s question correctly, while we remain members of the European Union, of course we are party to all the EU agreements and all the human rights elements attached to those. With regard to the future, the UK has as strong a history as any in the EU of promoting and protecting human rights around the world, including in relation to trade.

T6. [907886] Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In prioritising a post-Brexit free trade deal with Israel, will the Minister ensure that as far as possible the Palestinian Authority is included, because enhanced trade between the UK, Israel and the Palestinian Authority will be an essential part of building a sustainable and lasting peace?

Mark Garnier: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. The British Government absolutely support a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestine state. We should continue to engage with those countries. I was in Israel not so long ago, but I also visited Ministers in Palestine. We are very keen to engage with both Israel and Palestine.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): A recent parliamentary question revealed that the involvement of Scottish companies in the recent trade visit by the Prime Minister to India was very limited. What extra effort can the Secretary of State make to ensure that Scottish companies are better represented by the UK to support them in exporting into new international markets?

Dr Fox: We have repeatedly said that this Department is open to all businesses in the United Kingdom when it comes to seeking our support for exports, and I hope that the Scottish Government will encourage businesses in Scotland to work with the Department for International Trade, so that we can maximise that. We have made that offer, and we hope that they will take it up.

T7. [907887] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to promote a global free trade agenda?

Dr Fox: We have repeatedly set out our worries about the slowdown in the growth of global trade. That has implications across the globe. It is worth making the general point that we need more free trade because it increases global prosperity. Increasing global prosperity leads to greater political stability, and greater political stability leads to greater global security. It is not possible to disaggregate those different elements.
Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): When the Secretary of State is lobbying for foreign inward investment, does he agree with the comments of his friend the Foreign Secretary, who said that a pound spent in Croydon has more value to this country than a pound spent in Strathclyde?

Dr Fox: I bow to no one in this House in terms of my credentials as a Unionist, and I want to see prosperity spread to every part of the United Kingdom. I hope that the Scottish Government’s economic policies will help to contribute to that.
Business of the House

10.36 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please tell us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for next week will be as follows:

Monday 19 December—General debate on exiting the European Union and science and research.

Tuesday 20 December—General debate on leasehold and commonhold reform followed by general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.

The business for the week commencing 9 January will include:

Monday 9 January—Remaining stages of the Technical and Further Education Bill.

Tuesday 10 January—Remaining stages of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Policing and Crime Bill.

Wednesday 11 January—Opposition day (17th allotted day). There will be a debate, or debates, on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

Thursday 12 January—Debate on a motion on Yemen followed by debate on a motion relating to the security and political situation in the African great lakes region. Both debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 13 January—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 16 January will include:

Monday 16 January—Second Reading of the National Citizen Service Bill [Lords].

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for Thursday 12 January will be:

Thursday 12 January—Debate on the fourth report from the Justice Committee on restorative justice followed by general debate on the future of the UK maritime industry. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Liaison and Backbench Business Committees.

As this is the last exchange at business questions ahead of the recess, may I conclude by wishing a happy, peaceful and restful Christmas recess not just to right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, but more particularly to the staff of the House in all departments?

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business.

May I press the Leader of the House yet again for the date of the summer recess? People are absolutely desperate to print those little calendars. We do need that date.

May I also ask the Leader of the House for a date for the restoration and renewal report? I understand that a date has been floating around—people have mentioned it to me in passing. Can he enlighten all of us and perhaps let me know whether the resolution that is to be put before the House on this issue will be in the form of votable motions, whether all three options will be put to the House and whether Members can table further resolutions?

When will the Bus Services Bill arrive? It has the flashing sign, “Due”, but it has been due for a year now. It would be quite helpful to know that.

Did you know, Mr Speaker, that 21 years ago today—no, not “Sgt. Pepper”—European leaders announced that their new currency would be known as the euro? It was a Tory Government who took us into the European exchange rate mechanism—and out again—but a Labour Government who defined the five economic tests before we joined the euro. That is why we will not give the Government a blank cheque on article 50; we want to see the framework for negotiating. We know the vital statistics following the referendum—52% leave, 48% remain, and 28% did not vote—so we need to find a way forward that encompasses everybody’s view.

To Labour Members, the position is clear: the UK voted to leave the EU, and our job is to ensure that we shape that exit. We need to shape the exit to ensure that jobs, the economy and living standards are our priorities; that trade and services with and to the EU are not damaged; and that we preserve all the good things about our place in the world, acting in concert with other countries to protect the vulnerable against bullies. Negotiating a good trade agreement will help the UK to negotiate with other countries to preserve the rights that were secured for our workforce, who have powered this economy through knowledge, skills and creativity by hand and by brain. Will the Leader of the House therefore ensure that between January and March there are discussions through the usual channels on a proper form for debate? Many Select Committees are producing reports. We do not want the public to be confused and we do not want to get into post-truth debates: we want a proper form of motion and proper recommendations. We need all that in order to shape the Government’s thinking before article 50 is triggered.

We need that debate because there is confusion in the Government. On Friday last week, the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU said that he is “not interested” in transitional arrangements. On Monday in the Treasury Committee, the Chancellor said that the Government would likely seek a transitional deal in order to avoid disruption that would risk Britain’s “financial stability”. At PMQs the Prime Minister was very emphatic in saying that we are leaving the EU. Yet Downing Street says that it may consider EU associate citizenship that says that we are leaving the EU. Yet Downing Street says that it may consider EU associate citizenship that encompasses everybody’s view.

May we have a statement on the correct position?

We need to look at the effect of leaving the EU on young people and to debate how these policies will affect them, because 75% of those aged between 18 and 24 voted to remain. The Institute for Fiscal Studies warns that exiting the EU will herald the biggest pay squeeze for 70 years, with younger people hardest hit. Since 2007, the median income for those aged 22 to 30 has dropped by 7%. Inflation is already going up, and the cost of food and other necessities is rising. Will the Government look at implementing the real living wage based on the cost of living, which is £8.45 per hour, or £9.75 in London. That is not the Government’s living wage of £7.50, which will come in in April 2017?
At PMQs, many right hon. and hon. Members mentioned the music single for Jo Cox. Let me place on record my thanks to MP4, who did a fantastic job of organising and playing on it: my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), and the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight). Others who took part included Ian Cawsey and Mary Macleod, formerly of this House, who came back to sing, Steve Harley, KT Tunstall, the brilliant community choir, members of the Royal Opera House, and many colleagues. Jo’s family will have to face their first Christmas without her.

Many Members in all parts of the House are facing hostility. They have had to endure court cases. They have to deal with all this with courage. Will the Leader of the House and other Members try, on a cross-party basis, to find out the nature of and evidence for what is happening to our colleagues, because it is huge, and encourage them to report it. Perhaps we could have a streamlined way of ensuring that this matter is dealt with? Will he also look at what is happening when Members agree a package to keep their offices secure, because apparently they are not being implemented?

I do not know what the Leader of the House will give the Prime Minister for Christmas, but may I suggest a couple of books? The first is the autobiography of the former Prime Minister, John Major, in which he writes:

“Calling three of my colleagues, or a number of my colleagues”

a very non-parliamentary word

“was absolutely unforgivable. My only excuse is that it was true.”

The second is “Team of Rivals”, Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book about Abraham Lincoln and his Cabinet, three of whom had previously run against him.

Finally, Mr Speaker, may I wish you, your family and your office, the Leader of the House, his suave deputy and those in his office, the Clerks, the Doorkeepers and everyone who has made me so welcome, from the cleaning and catering staff, to the postal workers, and all right hon. and hon. Members a very happy Christmas and a peaceful new year?

Mr Lidington: I thank the hon. Lady for her personal good wishes. The thoughts and prayers of everybody in the House will be with Jo Cox’s family at this time. I also salute, as the Prime Minister did yesterday, what MP4 and other hon. Members on both sides of the House did to contribute to the recently released download.

The hon. Lady asked about the serious issue of the threats and abuse that a number of hon. Members in different political parties have been receiving. I and the House authorities take that very seriously. She will understand that we do not usually talk about such security matters in detail in the Chamber, but the Chairman of Ways and Means and I recently sent a letter to all Members of the House, alerting them to the existence of a dedicated police hotline to which any such threats should be reported. Certainly, both the Chairman of Ways and Means and I would want to know of any evidence or suggestion that a local police force was not taking such threats seriously. We would take the appropriate steps were we to receive such information. Similarly, if there is evidence that necessary security improvements to Members’ homes and offices are being held up on unreasonable grounds, I would certainly be willing, as would the Chairman of Ways and Means, to try to make sure that things were sorted out rapidly.

Turning to the policy points that the hon. Lady raised, I will try to give the summer recess dates as soon as possible, but she will appreciate that, in line with precedent, it has not been the custom for any Government to announce summer recess dates quite this early in the parliamentary year. Similarly, I hope to be able to satisfy as soon as possible her appetite for dates both for the report on the renewal and restoration of the House and for the Commons proceedings on the Bus Services Bill.

The hon. Lady might have noted in her comments on the EU that it was a Conservative Prime Minister, Sir John Major, who ensured that this country had the opt-out from the euro in the first place and that without his efforts that choice would not have been available to the United Kingdom.

On EU exit, I welcome the hon. Lady’s statement on Labour’s position, but I have to say that it is at odds with what her party’s own spokesman, the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), said just over a fortnight ago when he stated that we need to “keep our options open” on a second referendum. If we are to take the Labour party’s approach seriously, it has to accept that whichever side we campaigned on and supported during the referendum, and whether we agreed or disagreed with the verdict of the public, this was a decision that the electorate was democratically entitled to take and which almost all of us in the House agreed, in supporting the European Union Referendum Bill, should be delegated from Parliament to the voters of the United Kingdom to decide finally.

I think that the hon. Lady’s appetite for debates on the European Union will be more than sated in the new year. I also point out that there are more than 30 different Select Committee inquiries taking place in this House and in the House of Lords into various aspects of our departure from the European Union. She is right to say, as the Prime Minister has repeatedly said, that it is in our interests and in the interests of the other 27 members of the European Union to secure a negotiation that provides for as amicable a divorce as possible, because although we are leaving the European Union, we are not leaving Europe. A strong, productive, mutually beneficial relationship with the EU27 will be important both for the prosperity and security of all 28 countries and for effective co-operation, on an international scale, to deal with such challenges as large-scale migration from Africa and the threat from international terrorism, which will be with us, I am afraid, for a long time into the future.

The hon. Lady chided the Government about our approach to the living wage, but I have to say that we followed the advice of the Low Pay Commission in the recent increase in the national living wage. I note, too, that the Resolution Foundation, which is not always an unalloyed champion of Government policy, has said that 2016 has marked the best year ever for low-paid workers because of the Government’s commitment to the national living wage.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked me about Christmas presents. For some unaccountable reason, she omitted to mention that in the Opposition’s campaign grid for
this week, tomorrow is marked down as the day for Christmas jumpers. That combination of garish design, clashing colours and a general sense of naffness rather summarises where the shadow Cabinet is.

**Sir Simon Burns** (Chelmsford) (Con): Over the last three weeks or so, Chelmsford commuters travelling into London by train have had nightmare journeys because of broken-down trains, faulty track and other problems. Would my right hon. Friend be able to arrange for a statement by a Transport Minister on what can be done to stop such inefficient service provision, or would my right hon. Friend advise me that I ought to seek to catch Mr Speaker’s eye next Tuesday afternoon to contribute to the Adjournment debate before the recess?

**Mr Lidington:** For as long as I have been in the House, I have known that my right hon. Friend is the most formidable champion of commuters from Chelmsford—[HON. MEMBERS: “Chelmsford!”] I beg his pardon as well as yours, Mr Speaker—from Chelmsford. The Christmas spirit is getting to me.

There is an important message here for the franchise holder and the railway workers, who together have to make that line operate, that the interests of the travelling public should be first and foremost in their priorities at all times. I am sure that if my right hon. Friend catches your eye, Mr Speaker, Transport Ministers will be only too happy to respond to him.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing what there is of business next week; I thought for a minute that he was trying to talk out business questions. It is good to see a Leader of the House minus the lederhosen. Mr Speaker, may I take the opportunity to wish you and your family a merry Christmas? I extend that to the travelling public should be first and foremost in their priorities at all times. I am sure that if my right hon. Friend catches your eye, Mr Speaker, Transport Ministers will be only too happy to respond to him.

Merry Christmas to the Leader of the House, and your family too, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Lidington:** I happily endorse the hon. Gentleman’s tribute to Mick Jagger and Keith Richards for waiving their royalties.

I will pass on to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary the hon. Gentleman’s wish for a further statement on Aleppo next week. I think the House is united in a sense of horror at what civilians there have to endure. I know that Foreign Office Ministers are normally very keen to ensure that the House is informed as soon as possible about recent developments.

In my previous ministerial role, I worked with Ivan Rogers for a number of years. He is a formidable public servant who always reports to British Ministers in successive Governments what he picks up and what is said to him by various people in different Governments and EU institutions. It may be hard for you to believe, Mr Speaker, but in some countries people in the same Government say slightly different things about the future of Europe; that is not that unusual. The truth is that we have not set out the Government’s objectives in the negotiation to our 27 colleagues, nor have they yet met to hammer out their mandate for their appointed negotiators, so the speculation about how long the negotiations will take seems to me to be remarkably premature. If there is good will and strong political intent, I am confident that an amicable and good negotiation can lead to an agreement in which all sides can take pleasure.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): As we approach the time of the year at which there was no room at the inn for Jesus to be born in, may we have an early debate on the position facing many of our constituents who are moving into new shared ownership properties?

Mr Lidington: It is entirely right that we debate the many issues that our constituents face. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman’s constituents will be very interested to hear the views of the Neighbourhood Planning Bill to remove some of the causes of unnecessary delays to development, but I hope that local councils will use their powers—both through setting conditions on development, and through
I do not want to pre-empt what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government is going to say in his statement later today, but there is an opportunity next Tuesday in the Adjournment debate to raise precisely the kind of local city or county-specific issues that the hon. Gentleman has in mind.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Rothley post office in my constituency closed recently and moved its services to a local shop, despite strong local opposition. It appears from local reports that promises about services that were made during the consultation are not being fully adhered to by the Post Office. May we have a debate on the impact on rural communities of changes to the Post Office branch network and, in particular, on the importance of the Post Office adhering to assurances that it gives during consultations?

Mr Lidington: I would be concerned to hear that the Post Office was going back on previously accepted positions. My hon. Friend may wish to catch your eye to raise his constituency concerns. The Post Office operates as an independent business, and the Government do not interfere in day-to-day operational responsibilities, but the Post Office has a responsibility to carry out proper consultation locally and seek feedback from people. I hope that my hon. Friend will bring his constituents’ concerns directly to the attention of senior managers in the Post Office.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), I should inform the House that he received the Coppieters award last night in Brussels. I feel sure that the House will want to know that the Coppieters awards are an initiative of the Centre Maurits Coppieters to honour individuals and organisations that stand out in defence of cultural and linguistic diversity, intercultural dialogue, self-determination, the rights of minorities, peace, democracy and European integration. I hope that, in the circumstances, the right hon. Gentleman deservedly feels and will sound even more chipper than usual.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, and congratulations on the pronunciation, which displayed all your customary savoir faire—a quality also required of Leaders of the House. May we therefore have a brief statement now to show that the Leader of the House, alone in the Government, understands the difference between access to the single market, which just about everybody in the world has, and membership of the single market, which is an economic advantage that only 500 million people on this planet have just now? How many answers to business questions does the Leader of the House believe that he can cram into the 10 years that Sir Ivan Rogers estimates it will take to complete trade negotiations?

Mr Lidington: I sometimes think that the right hon. Gentleman wants to continue debating these matters indefinitely, rather than reach a decision and a good outcome for this country. However, may I genuinely congratulate him on his award? In response to his
points about the single market, one thing I learned in my six years as Europe Minister is that none of the four freedoms that are discussed in the context of the single market is unqualified in its operation. For example, the single market in goods is much more developed at EU level than the single market in services. To present “in or out of the single market” in the binary fashion of the right hon. Gentleman does not do justice to the complexity of the negotiation ahead of us. The Prime Minister has made it clear that she wants the maximum access for UK companies to the European single market, the greatest possible freedom for UK companies to operate within that market, and reciprocal rights for EU companies here.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): May we please have a debate on essential services? That would give me and hon. Members of all parties the opportunity to thank and pay tribute to our armed forces, who are serving in this country and around the world, the police, our NHS staff, care sector workers, prison officers, energy sector workers, security staff, care takers, transport workers, broadcasters and the many others who will have to work over the Christmas period.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Many of us will know of constituents or family members working in the health service, the police, the Army and other key public services, who will be on duty over the Christmas period. We want to wish them and their families well, and to say a profound “thank you” to them for their continuing service.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Having spent time on the police parliamentary scheme and seen close up the excellent work that our police officers do up and down the country, I am concerned that the Government now plan to make being a police officer a graduate entry occupation. There are a number of excellent police officers who do not have degrees, especially the bobby on the beat. May we have a statement of excellent police officers who do not have degrees, or is it a graduate entry occupation? There are a number of police officers—and the many others who will have to work over the Christmas period.

Mr Lidington: There will be many opportunities when we return in January for every aspect of our departure from the European Union to be debated in full, and for Ministers from all relevant Departments to be questioned.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Tomorrow is Local Charities Day. We all have very good local charities in our constituencies. One of mine is Crazy Hats, run by Glennis Hooper and her group of dedicated volunteers, who have raised more than £2 million through people wearing crazy hats. They spend that money on breast cancer care in Northamptonshire. Will the Leader of the House tell us how those charities can be further supported?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have indulged the hon. Gentleman for the duration of his question, but I am glad that he has now taken that hat off. I sincerely hope he will not put it on again—preferably not at any time, but certainly not in the Chamber.

Mr Lidington: I thought for one moment that my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) was auditioning for a role in some remake of the film “Elf”. The Chancellor has demonstrated through improvements in the gift aid scheme that the Government are keen to provide greater opportunities for small local charities to benefit from donations. Legislation going through Parliament at the moment will make further concessions to help such charities. We will all want to celebrate tomorrow the work that so many thousands of local charities do in every constituency in this country.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Even though you were not able to call me during International Trade questions, Mr Speaker, may I wish you a very happy Christmas? I especially want to do so because at one stage it looked like the House of Commons children’s Christmas party would not happen, and I believe that you played a role in making sure that it did. We had a lovely party on Tuesday. All the kids had a great time, as did the parents and grandparents, so thank you for that.

Before I came here today I consulted my constituents about the neglected issues that they want us to go back to in the new year. They had three. The first was of course Aleppo, that heartrending, disgraceful blot on our civilised world. The second was the fact that we are likely to lose our A&E hospital in Huddersfield. The
third was that we are neglecting the people who make things in our country, our manufacturers; in International Trade questions, the M-word was hardly spoken. Those are my constituents’ three priorities. May we have debates on them early in January? And happy Christmas, everyone.

Mr Lidington: I shall look for opportunities to provide debates on all those important subjects. As I said earlier, sustainability and transformation plans must meet four specific criteria. The hon. Gentleman’s local authority has the right to challenge and refer to the Secretary of State any change to services to which it objects.

Aleppo has already been debated and been the subject of questions this week, but I do not think there is any Member who does not share the hon. Gentleman’s horror at what we have seen. It is a matter of the utmost regret—that is putting it too mildly—that Russia, sometimes in alliance with other countries, has consistently vetoed Security Council resolutions designed to ensure a ceasefire and the peaceful evacuation of civilians from affected areas.

On manufacturing, support for it and the upgrading of our skills base so that we can compete internationally in high-value manufacturing are core elements of the Government’s economic and industrial strategy.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): At both of the recent Women and Equalities questions, the Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), committed to publishing the consultation document on caste discrimination legislation. That will give British Hindus the opportunity to ensure that this ill-thought-out, divisive and unnecessary legislation is removed from the statute book. Time is short. There are only three more days of parliamentary time before the end of the year, when the release of the consultation has been promised. Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House ensure that we have a statement to the House on the consultation document before Parliament rises, so that British Hindus have the optimal opportunity to respond to it?

Mr Lidington: I will draw the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to my hon. Friend’s concern.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Yesterday, as chair of the all-party kidney group, I hosted, with the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), a symposium of leading experts on kidney disease. One thing that shocked us was that a quarter of people on dialysis have diabetes. Early monitoring of diabetic kidneys for renal failure would make a huge difference to those who go on to need dialysis and transplantation. May we have a debate on how far it was from Castlemilk to Newlands, which I am surprised about, given that when the Department for Work and Pensions calculated the distance, it did not use any of the great resources at its fingertips; instead, it used Google Maps. That is how it calculated its decision to close eight of Glasgow’s 16 jobcentres. Here we are, however, eight days on from the announcement, and still the consultation is not on the DWP website—so that is at least eight days by which it will have to extend the consultation. Will the right hon. Gentleman help me to facilitate getting it put on the website today, and will he convey our frustration to Ministers at the way they have handled this whole sorry affair?

Mr Lidington: The central point is that there will no change in the level of service that jobcentres offer people in Glasgow. The DWP is merging a number of smaller offices into bigger sites as leases come to an end so that we can save taxpayers, including Scottish taxpayers, money without changing the service offered. The Government have already consulted on the plans, but there will be further consultation in areas where people have to travel more than three miles or for longer than 20 minutes to reach a jobcentre.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on horse-racing, particularly the bravery of jockeys? Horse-racing is undoubtedly the finest sport there is and plays an important part in many communities’ local economies, but it would not be possible without jockeys and their bravery. One in 10 jump jockey rides ends in a fall. Freddy Tylicki, a flat jockey, recently suffered life-changing injuries from a fall on the flat, and Mark Enright recently spoke about the mental health problems that he and other jockeys have faced, particularly in keeping their weight down to ride horses. Such a debate would enable us to praise those jockeys, the British Horseracing Authority and the Professional Jockeys Association. Will the Leader of the House grant such a debate and see if the Government can help the horse-racing industry to tackle these matters?

Mr Lidington: Millions of people in this country enjoy horse-racing in all its forms and admire the guts and determination of jockeys, and it is a very risky occupation, but, as I am sure my hon. Friend will...
acknowledge, it is one for which those jockeys volunteer; they accept the sort of devastating risks he describes and, I think, derive huge pleasure and accomplishment from it.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I ask that the Leader of the House offer up a feast for Members on both sides of the House: the Transport Secretary at the Dispatch Box to answer for the chaos that our constituents have been suffering on the railways. It would give him an opportunity to explain why he refused, on political grounds, to give suburban services to the Mayor of London, which is something now supported by businesses in London, and to listen to what Members think about his decision.

Mr Lidington: I recall my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary answering hon. Members’ questions about this within the last two weeks. I hope that the hon. Gentleman, in his work on the railways, might drop a line to ASLEF inquiring why it has so far refused to respond to the Transport Secretary’s invitation to come to talks to try to end this devastating strike, which is plaguing so many commuters in the south of England.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): May we please have a debate on the implementation of personal independence payments? I have been contacted by constituents with serious long-term health issues of personal independence payments? I have been contacted by NICE nationally or by local commissioners looking always at the clinical effectiveness of those drugs. I do not think it would be right to go back to a system in which Ministers, perhaps influenced by the political voices of whichever campaign shouted the loudest, took these decisions, instead of the expert bodies.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): May we have a statement or a debate in Government time on the World Health Organisation protocol to eliminate the illicit trade in tobacco products? In June, in a response to a Lords parliamentary question, we learned that the Government are fully committed to ratification of the protocol, and will ratify once they are satisfied that legislation is in place to require the licensing of tobacco machinery. However, growth in this criminal trade continues to threaten public health and results in a loss of Government revenue. Is it not high time that we had an update?

Mr Lidington: It strikes me that there will be an excellent opportunity for the hon. Gentleman to raise this issue in questions to the Health Secretary next Tuesday.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Sadly, in July, a constituent’s teenage daughter needed to seek acute mental health care on an in-patient basis. The nearest available bed was in Colchester—an eight-hour round trip by car, causing her family untold hardship, both emotionally and financially. Will the Leader of the House clarify whether this is what his Government mean by “parity of esteem”? I hope he agrees with me that owing to the seriousness of this issue, we need an urgent debate.

Mr Lidington: We have not only legislated to give mental and physical health equal priority in law, but the Government have introduced the first ever access and waiting standards for mental health services, which never existed under previous Administrations. Some 1,400 more people are accessing mental health services every day compared with 2010—an increase of 40%—and we are investing more taxpayers’ money in mental health than ever before. Yes, there is more to be done—I do not deny that for an instant—but I think this Government have shown greater determination than any of their predecessors in moving forward to improve the quality of mental health services available to our constituents.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): May we have a debate on the importance of accessibility for disabled people to local sports grounds and amenities? I recently had an inspirational meeting with East Kilbride youth disability sports club, many of whose members, I am delighted to inform the House, will be taking part in the special Olympics next year. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is an important issue, and that we require access for all to maximise potential and should focus on ability rather than disability?

Mr Lidington: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. Wearing my hat as the Member whose constituency includes Stoke Mandeville, I think that sport has shown...
that it can provide one of the best means available for people with disabilities of all kinds to show that they can achieve great things and have those achievements celebrated by the public as a whole. I hope all sports governing bodies and the management of stadiums and other premises will pay close attention to the hon. Lady’s words.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The Drive for Justice campaign is being led by Sheffield’s The Star and its sister publications, looking at sentences for causing death by dangerous driving. One mother pointed out that the drunken woman who had murdered her 15-year-old son had served only one year in prison, while she described herself as serving “a life sentence”. May we have an urgent debate on sentencing guidelines for causing death by dangerous driving?

Mr Lidington: The next Transport questions are not until 12 January, but the hon. Lady will know that the Government have recently put out to public consultation proposed increases in the severity of sentences for dangerous driving. I hope she and her constituents will avail themselves of the opportunity to make their voices heard during that consultation.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): At the weekend, there were newspaper reports that the Home Office has stopped transfers to the UK of unaccompanied minors registered in the Calais camp. Most worryingly, there were reports that children awaiting transfer in France are going missing and that children who have come to the UK under the schemes operated by the British Government have gone missing after their arrival. May we have a statement from the Home Secretary before Christmas updating the House on the operation of the scheme under both the Dublin system and the Dubs amendment?

Mr Lidington: I will draw the hon. and learned Lady’s concern to the Home Secretary’s attention. The Home Office continues to work very closely with the French authorities to ensure that we identify the most vulnerable children and give them priority in our

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): This is the third Christmas for which six veterans, including my constituent Billy Irving, will be stuck in jail in India awaiting yet another judgment. Will the Leader of the House join me in making a new year resolution to do everything in his power to bring these innocent men home, and may we have a statement on what the Government will do to make sure that that happens?

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Lady knows, those men are being held under the Indian judicial system. Although we cannot give orders to another country about how it operates its judicial system, the case of the hon. Lady’s constituent and the other men being detained has frequently been raised by Ministers when speaking to their Indian counterparts, and continues to be raised by our high commissioner in New Delhi. We will continue to make such representations.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Instead of the traditional Adjournment debate, perhaps Tuesday’s debate could be on the substantive motion, in tribute to our fallen colleague Jo Cox, that this House believes we have more in common than that which divides us. If we did have such a debate, that would enable us to highlight wonderful gestures like that of the bookmaker William Hill, which has said this morning that it will donate all the money staked on the Friends of Jo Cox single becoming Christmas No. 1 and in addition make a £5,000 donation to the Jo Cox Foundation. Does the Leader of the House agree it would be a wonderful gesture if all the other major bookmakers matched William Hill’s generosity?

Mr Lidington: I pay tribute to the action of William Hill. It has set a precedent that others might indeed wish to look at closely.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Last week’s announcement of 270 job losses at the Doosan Babcock facility in Renfrew may herald the end of 121 years of production and industrial heritage, so may we have a debate on advanced manufacturing and what we can do to protect jobs in that sector, particularly in light of the Government’s plans to leave the biggest single market in the world?

Mr Lidington: Any job losses of the type that the hon. Gentleman has described are to be regretted, but he will surely welcome the fact that unemployment in Scotland has fallen significantly since this Government took office and that more people are in work in the United Kingdom today than ever before.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House say when the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill will get its money resolution and move into Committee? If he cannot, will he say why?

Mr Lidington: As I said at business questions last week, the Bill’s promoter did not publish it until three days before its Second Reading was due to be debated. No estimate or description of costs was provided with the Bill, and the Government are now having to undertake that analytical work.
Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House aware of the “Bartend against Bombs” campaign? It was started in Chester by my constituents Calum Adams and Ben Iles and involves low-paid bar and hospitality staff giving a large proportion of their gratuities to charities that support children. It has now been rolled out across the country, making thousands of pounds in just a couple of years. In view of my constituents’ marvellous success, now would be a good time to debate about and celebrate voluntary and charitable giving.

Mr Lidington: I give my unreserved congratulations to those bartenders in Chester. I understand that they have raised more than £7,000 over the past year for aid in Syria. We rightly take pride in the fact that the UK has pledged £2.3 billion of taxpayers’ money to tackle the humanitarian crisis in Syria, but the hon. Gentleman’s constituents have demonstrated that that sense of solidarity with the suffering people of Syria is felt widely and in every part of this country.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): I recently visited the Real Food Cafe in Tyndrum in my constituency. It is an excellent business that employs many EU nationals, but they are extremely concerned about their future following the vote in June. Given the position in which the Government find themselves with their wrongheaded policy, will they reflect on that concern over the Christmas period and come back with a statement in the new year to give certainty to those employees, who make such a contribution to our society?

Mr Lidington: On the behalf of the Government, I will say very clearly that people from other EU countries who have come here lawfully in order to work, who are obeying the law and paying their taxes, are contributing to our society. The Prime Minister has made it clear on many occasions that we want an early agreement on a deal that enables those EU nationals already in this country to know that their rights here are secure and, equally, that UK nationals living elsewhere in the EU will have their rights respected on the same basis.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As the great Tory party icon Ebenezer Scrooge saw the error of his ways at this time of year, may we have a statement or debate in the new year on building a social security system based on the needs of the most vulnerable and poorest in our society? Does the Leader of the House agree that initiatives such as the Govan community toy bank, which has provided toys to more than 700 families over the last two years, brings into focus why such a change in social security, and our economy, is necessary?

Mr Lidington: The truth is that whatever system of social security we have in this country, voluntary initiatives such as the Govan toy bank will have a significant additional role to play. We cannot shy away from the fact that we need to have a welfare system in the United Kingdom that is fair both to those people who are genuinely in need and to taxpayers, especially taxpayers who work hard on modest wages to pay for that social security system.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP) rose—

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP) rose—

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

Mr Speaker: I call Brendan O’Hara.

Brendan O’Hara: During Monday’s Defence questions, I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) why the national shipbuilding strategy had not yet been published. In her reply, she accused me of “complaining about the lack of publication of a report that has been published”.—[Official Report, 12 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 485.]

May we have a Government statement, preferably right now, to confirm for my benefit, the country’s benefit, the benefit of this House and, most importantly, the benefit of the Under-Secretary that Sir John Parker’s report is not the national shipbuilding strategy, and that that strategy has not been published and indeed will not be published until the spring of next year?

Mr Lidington: At the end of the question, the hon. Gentleman was replaying a timetable that I had given him in the past at this Dispatch Box. He is right to say that the Parker report has presented the Government with some very far-reaching recommendations for the future of our shipbuilding industry. The hon. Gentleman and his friends would have been the first to criticise us had Ministers rushed to the Dispatch Box abruptly after the publication of the report, rather than first giving it the serious consideration it needs.

Alan Brown rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Alan Brown. [Interruption.]

Alan Brown: It appears my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) does not want to hear what I have to say—it is his loss. After the autumn statement, the Government made great play of the £23 billion investment fund, however a single budget line of £7 billion has been put back to 2021-22—that is beyond the scope of this Parliament. That budget line is called “long-term investment”, so will the Leader of the House make a statement explaining what that money is for, how a future Government can be held to account on it and why, if it really is for long-term investment, we are not making that investment right now?

Mr Lidington: It is sensible to have provision in a medium-term economic plan, and obviously it will be for the Government to decide on and, if necessary, seek parliamentary approval for the details of spending within that overall envelope, when we have taken stock of where the economy is closer to that date. In talking
about the autumn statement, I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would have had the grace to acknowledge not only the £23 billion that the Chancellor has set aside for infrastructure, but the £800 million infrastructure bonus going to Scotland as a result of those decisions.

Mr Speaker: I have just been informed of a most remarkable, almost novel development in the House, namely that an hon. Member has beetled out of the Chamber and not asked his question on the ground that it had already been asked—that has never normally stopped Members! It has to be said that the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) is a most unusual denizen of the House. Let me also say that I am most grateful to the Leader of the House and to colleagues.

Just before I call the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to make his statement, I will just say this: I understand that a copy of the statement was provided to the Opposition spokesman only approximately 15 minutes ago, and that is, frankly, a discourtesy, not only to the Opposition, but to the House. It is also a departure from a very long-standing and almost invariably adhered to convention in this place. I must say to the Secretary of State, in all courtesy, that I had considered, in the circumstances, a brief suspension of the House, but after consultation and on reflection, I am persuaded, not least in the light of other business with which we have to deal today, that it is probably best for the House to press on. That said, this must not happen again.

Moreover, I very gently say to the Secretary of State one further thing: he inquired of my office earlier whether it would be acceptable for his statement to be of 15 minutes’ length rather than the normal 10, because he wished to provide the House with as much detail as possible. It is acceptable for him to do that on this occasion, but of course compensation must be granted to the Opposition spokesperson in terms of the length of his reply. All of that said, I nevertheless would like to wish the Secretary of State, the Opposition spokesman and of course all colleagues a very merry Christmas.
supply and more than 1.2 million homes have been delivered. But for all its successes, the system can be improved.

A year ago, we consulted on a number of possible reforms to the scheme. Having studied those results closely, I can confirm today that, from next year, we will introduce a national baseline for housing growth of 0.4%. Below that, the new homes bonus will not be paid. That will help to ensure that the money is used to reward additional housing rather than just normal growth.

From 2018-19, we will consider withholding new homes bonus payments from local authorities that are not planning effectively by making positive decisions on planning applications and delivering housing growth. To encourage more effective planning, we will also consider withholding payments for homes that are built following an appeal. A consultation on this will take place in due course.

We will implement our preferred option in the consultation, reducing the number of years for which payments are made from six years to five years in 2017-18 and to four years from 2018-19. This will release important funding for adult social care, recognising the demographic changes of an ageing population, as well as a growing population.

I am sure that all Members on both sides of this House agree on the need for action to meet the growing cost of caring for some of our most vulnerable citizens. Every year councils spend more than £14 billion on adult social care. It is by far the biggest cost pressure facing local government. The spending review put in place up to £3.5 billion of additional funding for adult social care by 2019-20, allowing local government to increase its spending on this service in real terms by the end of this Parliament, but more needs to be done. Over recent months we have listened to, heard and understood calls from across the board saying that funding is needed sooner in order to meet short-term pressures.

Today I can confirm that savings from reforms to the new homes bonus will be retained in full by local government to contribute towards adult social care costs. I can tell the House that we will use these funds to provide a new dedicated £240 million adult social care support grant in 2017-18, to be distributed fairly according to relative need. I can also confirm the indicative allocations of the improved better care fund that we published last year. The Department of Health will shortly be confirming allocations of the public health grant to councils for next year.

Last year we agreed to the request by many leaders in local government to introduce a social care council tax precept of 2½% a year, guaranteed to be spent on adult social care. The precept puts money-raising powers into the hands of local leaders, who best understand the needs of their community and are best placed to respond. In recognition of the immediate challenges faced in the care market, we will now allow local councils to raise this funding sooner if they wish. Councils will be granted the flexibility to raise the precept by up to 3% next year and the year after. This will provide a further £208 million to spend on adult social care in 2017-18 and £444 million in 2018-19. These measures, together with the changes we have made to the new homes bonus, will make almost £900 million of additional funding for adult social care available over the next two years.

However, we do not believe that more money is the only answer. There is variation in performance across the country that cannot be explained by different levels of spending. Some areas have virtually no delayed transfers of care from hospital, but there is a twentyfold difference between the best and the worst performing 10% of areas. It is vital, therefore, that we finish the job of integrating our health and social care systems. We know that this can improve outcomes and make funding go even further, helping people to manage their own health and wellbeing and to live independently for as long as possible. There are already some strong examples of where this works. For example, in Oxfordshire joined-up working has seen delayed discharges plummet by over 40% in just six months. Meanwhile, Northumberland has saved £5 million by joining up with the local health care trust, reducing demand for residential care by some 12%.

The better care fund is already supporting this with £5.3 billion of funding pooled between councils and clinical commissioning groups last year. But we also want to make sure that all local authorities learn from the best performers and the best providers, so we will soon publish an integration and better care fund policy framework to support this. In the long term, we will need to develop the reforms that will provide a sustainable market that works for everyone who needs social care.

We also need to recognise that demographic pressures are affecting different areas in different ways, as is the changing cost of providing services, so we are undertaking a fair funding review to thoroughly consider how to introduce a more up-to-date, more transparent and fairer needs-assessment formula. The review is looking at all the services provided by local government, and will determine the starting point for local authorities under the 100% business rate retention programme. This is an opportunity to be bold—an opportunity for bottom-up change. We are working with representatives from local government on the review, and we will report on our progress to the House in the new year.

Council tax is a local decision, and local councils will need to justify social care precept rises to their taxpayers. They will need to show how the additional income is spent to support people who need care in their area and how it improves adult social care services. However, it is worth noting that the extra flexibility to raise funding for adult social care next year will add just £1 a month to the average council tax bill. The overall increase to the precept in the next three years will remain at 6%, so bills will be no higher in 2019-20. In our manifesto, we made a commitment to keep council tax down, and that is exactly what has happened. Since 2010-11, council tax has fallen in real terms by 9%. By 2019-20, hard-working families will be paying less council tax in real terms than they were when we came to power.

However, last year we saw a worrying 6.1% rise in precepts in town and parish councils. That is why, earlier this year, we consulted on extending council tax referendums to larger town and parish councils. These councils play an important role in our civic life, and I understand the practical considerations of scale, so we have decided that we will defer our proposals this year, while keeping the level of precepts set by town and parish councils under close review. I expect all town and parish councils to clearly demonstrate restraint when setting increases that are not a direct result of taking on
additional responsibilities. I am also actively considering with the sector ways to make excessive increases more transparent to local taxpayers.

This local government finance settlement honours our commitment to four-year funding certainty for councils that are committed to reform. It paves the way towards financial self-sufficiency for local government and the full devolution of business rates. It recognises the costs of delivering adult social care and makes more funding available sooner. It puts local councillors in the driving seat and keeps bills down for hard-working taxpayers. I commend it to the House.

11.58 am

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): This is a settlement that will leave the people of England paying higher taxes and getting worse public services for their money. For some, this settlement will still mean that the support they had hoped would be there for an elderly or vulnerable relative is not available. For others, visible public services, such as street cleaning and rubbish collection, will be cut ever closer to the bone, and even more youth centres and libraries will close.

While it would have been nice to see the statement in good time, at least we can be grateful that the crisis in the Conservative party over the price of a pair of trousers has abated enough to allow the chief of staff at No.10 to decide what the Secretary of State can say today.

Is not the real truth about this statement that there is no new money for local authorities to tackle the social crisis now? Moving new homes bonus money around in a few years’ time is not going to tackle the crisis now. On 18 July, when the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services was already raising the alarm, the Secretary of State said of social care, in response to my hon. friend the Member for Easington (Grahame M. Morris): "I do not accept that it is underfunded."—[Official Report, 18 July 2016, Vol. 613, c. 530.]

Why has it taken so long for the Secretary of State to spot that there might be a problem after all?

This is a crisis that Ministers still do not seem to grasp the severity of, with £4.6 billion axed from social care budgets as a result of their cuts since 2010, and 1.2 million people, according to Age UK, not getting the care they need. There are even senior figures in the Secretary of State’s own party with a closer grip on reality than he appears to have, such as Lord Porter, the chairman of the Local Government Association, who notes:

“Services supporting our elderly and vulnerable are at breaking point now.”

Does the Secretary of State share our view that we did not need to be in this position? Does he remember how, before the 2010 general election, senior figures in his party chose to kill off serious cross-party talks on how to fund social care going forward?

Once Ministers finally began to realise that there might actually be a bit of a problem, they reached for that old Conservative favourite: blaming councils themselves. Ministers like to attack councils, but is not the truth that councillors and local authority staff up and down the country are doing their best to plug the funding gap to cope with huge rising demand for care and increasing costs?

When will the Secretary of State address the worsening postcode lottery for social care? In the most deprived areas of the country, social care spending fell by £65 per person, but it rose by £28 per person in the least deprived areas. Will he not accept that the rising social care precept will only further entrench this inequality? I gently ask of him: is this really the best time to be choosing to cut corporation tax on Amazon, Sports Direct and the big banks?

Since the Prime Minister came to office, there has been much talk of help for those who are only just about managing their finances. That seems to have gone out of the window today as the Prime Minister decides to put up the council tax in every part of England again. To borrow her words, “If you are from an ordinary working-class family, life is much harder than many people in Downing Street realise. You have your own home but you worry about the cost of living, the state of your area, and the services you rely on, and you also worry whether you can pay the tax bill at the end of each month.” Today she decided to make it just a bit harder for them to manage. On top of council tax rises this year, there is 3% in 2017-18 and more again in 2018-19, and by 2020, a 17% increase in council tax compared with 2015—all decided in Downing Street.

Who would have thought it: the Conservatives, who once claimed to be in favour of low taxes, putting up taxes every year until the next election?

The truth is that social care is in crisis. This settlement means even deeper cuts in funding and worse public services. Is not the truth that the people of England deserve better?

Sajid Javid: The shadow Minister claims that as a result of today’s news there is “no new money”—those were his words—for adult social care. He could not be more wrong. However, if he wants to imagine what a world would look like with no new money for adult social care, that is exactly what would have happened had the result of the last election been different. Let us just remember what the then shadow Chancellor said:

“There will be no additional funding for local government”.

He went on to say, when pushed on the point, that there will not be a penny more for local government.

The shadow Minister mentioned, and rightly so, the important role that the NHS plays in providing and helping with adult social care. Let us also remember that at the last general election the Labour party’s plans were to cut NHS spending by £5.3 billion—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I need to hear the Secretary of State. You may disagree with him, but everyone wants to get in, and if I am going to get people in, let us hear the Secretary of State.

Sajid Javid: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. If the Labour party had had its way, NHS funding would have been £1.3 billion lower this year. What difference would that have made to people, especially the most vulnerable in our society? We should be grateful that Labour is not in office.
Under this Government, the spending review allocated an additional £3.5 billion of funding for adult social care by 2020. Let me focus precisely on the shadow Minister’s claim that there is no new money, because he is absolutely wrong. There is new money, with today’s announcement of £240 million that otherwise would have gone to the new homes bonus. We have responded to what local councils and many local authority leaders have asked for and repurposed that money. There is also an additional £654 million because of the precept changes. If the shadow Minister cannot work that out, he needs to look again at his basic mathematics skills. Taken together, those numbers mean an additional £900 million over and above the spending review settlement over the next two years. That means approximately £450 million of new money each year for the next two years.

The shadow Minister also referred to council tax bills, which reminded me of what the shadow Minister for adult social care, the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), said recently:

“...taxpayers...to pick up the bill...is no substitute for a proper plan.”

The Opposition need to learn that there is no such thing as Government money—it is all taxpayers’ money, whether it is raised locally or nationally. I know that the leader of the Opposition believes in a magic money tree, but I did not realise that all Opposition Members feel the same way. If we want properly funded services, including for adult social care, there needs to be a balance between those who pay for them—the taxpayers—and those who use them. That means making the right decisions to make sure that the services are properly funded and, at the same time, that tax bills do not rise more than necessary. That is why I am proud that, under this Government, even taking into account the precept changes that we have announced today, by the end of this Parliament the average council tax bill will be lower in real terms than it was in 2010.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome today’s statement. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that 97% of local authorities have agreed a four-year long-term deal, which is welcome and allows them to plan for the future? That means, however, that 3% of local authorities have not agreed the deal. What impact will their failure to agree a long-term settlement with the Department have on their council tax payers and the future of their services?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a very good point and it is worth talking about it a bit more. As he rightly says, the good news is that 97% of councils have accepted the four-year settlement. That means that 10 councils have not, including, unfortunately, his local council, Harrow. In practice, that means that those councils will have an annual, year-by-year settlement, which will deny local people the certainty that they seek. It also means that they have not put together efficiency plans, as the other councils will have done. It is a shame that they did not accept the settlement. That was entirely up to them, but it will have consequences.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that his statement still leaves life very challenging indeed for most local authorities dealing with social care and the crisis that it is in?

Will he confirm that even £900 million goes only part-way towards filling the £2.5 billion to £3.5 billion gap that the LGA, the Nuffield Trust and the King’s Fund believe will exist by the end of the spending review period? Why has he chosen not to pay the new homes bonus money through the better care fund, which would have enabled him to target the money at the poorest authorities, which raise the least through the precept?

Finally, I do not know whether the Secretary of State saw that Simon Stevens and Stephen Dorrell came before the Communities and Local Government Committee yesterday. They said that integration between health and social care was desirable, but that that of itself will not solve the problems of social care in the longer term. Will he agree to a much wider review, including the full involvement of the LGA, to try to get cross-party agreement for a genuine, sustainable solution for the longer term, which will need all-party support?

Sajid Javid: I always take very seriously what the Chair of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government has to say, and I know that he considers such matters carefully. To answer his questions, he may recall that at the spending review last year the LGA asked for, I think, £2.9 billion of extra funding for adult social care by the end of the Parliament. The spending review provided more than that—£3.5 billion—and the changes that we have announced today add another £900 million on top of that £3.5 billion. That is a significant increase, and even more so when we look back at what the LGA was considering just last year.

Bob Blackman: The hon. Gentleman asked about the allocation of the £240 million that would otherwise have gone into the new homes bonus. He will know that the allocation of the improved better care fund, which is worth £1.5 billion by the end of this Parliament, takes into account the council tax-raising powers of each local area. The £240 million is allocated based on relative need, and I think that that is the best way to do it.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I quite agree with the Government that we need more money and reform. The two local authorities serving my constituency were short-changed in the past, which is a separate issue. On the general question, what can be done about the perverse incentive created by the fact that if a council does not come up with a timely care package, a person will stay for longer in an expensive hospital bed, where they do not want to be and which is needed for other purposes?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend highlights the vital issue of more and better integration between the healthcare system and the adult social care system. I referred in my statement to places where we are seeing good practice. I mentioned Manchester and Northumberland, and there are some other such areas. Many areas can learn from that, especially on things such as delayed transfers of care. We want to see more work in this area. That is why the Department has already started to work with the Health Secretary on a set of principles that we expect to be implemented as local authorities access the additional funding.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The great city of Birmingham has been hit hard by the biggest cuts in local government history—£800 million. That is having increasingly “catastrophic consequences”
for public services, in the words of the chief executive. According to the chief executive of Birmingham YMCA, it is leading inevitably to more young men and women dying, like the young man who froze to death on a Birmingham street on 29 November. Birmingham has been denied a fair deal. Can the Secretary of State begin to explain why—as we have seen with nursery schools last week, schools yesterday and local government today—Birmingham is treated less fairly than the Prime Minister’s own constituency of Maidenhead? It cannot be right to put the interests of the Tory party above the interests of the public.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman should re-examine the figures and get them right. I have here some helpful figures for him. He will know that Birmingham has significant failings, which is why an independent panel was put in place by my predecessor. Failings were significant in management areas. The hon. Gentleman seems to suggest that there is a real funding issue with Birmingham, but let me give him the facts. Birmingham, among the metropolitan districts, by 2019-20 will receive £1,984 per dwelling, in comparison with the average of £1,767. It is a well-funded local authority, and it is incumbent on those who run it to do so more efficiently in the interests of their residents.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): In four years’ time, Birmingham’s money will go up, but the money for Worthing, Arun and Adur will not. Those who throw accusations across the Chamber should look at the figures.

Leaving aside most of my right hon. Friend’s statement, I think he should pay a lot of attention to the consultation on whether planning permission granted on appeal should not count towards the new homes bonus. Many times, it seems as though rationally produced local authority and parish council plans are torn up by some imposition of new housing targets. I hope that he will pay a lot of attention to that. I am glad that he has taken away the referendums on parish council increases. Parish councils are closest to the people, they can easily be turned out and they can be trusted.

Sajid Javid: I know that my hon. Friend will be pleased by the fact that the Neighbourhood Planning Bill passed its Third Reading this week. One of the things that the Bill tries to do is to make neighbourhood plans even stronger and easier for local communities to put together, and I know that he supports me in that goal. On the issue that he raised, as I said in my statement, we are minded to deny the new homes bonus where planning permission is granted on appeal, but we will have a consultation on that, and then we will decide.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Liverpool has high levels of poverty. It also has an innovative local authority that believes in value for money. Liverpool City Council has already lost 58% of central Government funding, and yesterday, in a redistribution of education funding, it lost £3.5 million more. What does today’s statement do, in concrete and specific terms, to address the crisis in social care, except ask poor people to pay more? Even that will not address the growing crisis of people in need.

Sajid Javid: I was in Liverpool a couple of weeks ago, and I met local leaders, including the chief executive, because I want to understand directly some of the challenges that Liverpool is going through. Some of the changes we have announced today will help Liverpool and other places that are in the same situation. The hon. Lady will know, for example, that the allocation of the better care fund takes into account the power of a local area to raise council tax, and that benefits places such as Liverpool. She may have noted from the statement the extra £240 million that will be based on need; that will certainly advantage Liverpool. She may also be interested to know that Liverpool’s council tax spending power per dwelling is rising from £1,922 in 2017-18 to £2,041, which is a much bigger increase than in most other areas in the same situation.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It is good news that people are living longer—in the decade to 2015, there has been a 31% increase in the number of people living to 85 and over—but already, more than a million people have unmet care needs. Although I welcome the fact that some of this money will be brought forward, I do not feel as though we are going far enough in this House to address the scale of the increase in demand and allow people to be cared for with dignity in their old age. May I join the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee in asking the Government to start cross-party talks urgently to ensure that we have a long-term, fair, sustainable settlement for both health and social care?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend speaks with experience. I know that she has spent a great deal of time looking into this issue, especially in her work as Chair of the Select Committee on Health, and I take what she has to say very seriously. I think I am correct in saying that my hon. Friend used the words “bring forward spending”. Today’s announcement on adult social care does more than just bring it forward; it is a real, significant increase in spending of £900 million. To be clear, that is an additional £900 million over the next two years where there are some of the biggest short-term pressures. That would not have happened had these changes not been announced. It is, significantly, new money, not just bringing forward spending. I know that she will welcome that clarification.

My hon. Friend referred to the need to talk widely, including with members of the Opposition. I would include in that local leaders, health professionals and social care professionals, and that is certainly what I intend to do over the coming months, to make sure that we keep this always under review.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): This is, surely, a truly feeble response to a national crisis. The LGA would be entitled to reject the proposal and put the ball firmly back in the Government’s court, for them to think again. This is an unfair way to raise additional money; it will increase inequalities between rich and poor areas. When will the Government come forward with plans to work genuinely across parties? There have been two suggestions about that already in this question-and-answer session, but the Secretary of State has not answered either one. When will be work with others to come up with a genuine solution to what is now a real national crisis?
Sajid Javid: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, any funding provided to a local authority is raised through taxes, either locally or, when that funding is in the form of grants, nationally. He used the word “unfair” about this funding, but he should be aware—I know he has experience in this area—that when we allocate billions of funding from the better care fund, we take into account the council tax-raising power of each area. That is the basis used, and it is the fairest way to do it. We have given councils flexibility through the precept, and we have enhanced that flexibility today so that councils are in a better position to meet local needs. That is also a sensible and fair policy. Where councils have more demand for services locally, they should be given the power to deal with that.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I appreciate the appalling pressure that the Secretary of State is under on adult social care, but may I press him further on the new homes bonus? This is an important point. The bonus is vital in industrial towns such as Gainsborough to promoting difficult developments on brownfield sites. What worries me about his proposal is that if a council such as West Lindsey does not meet the 0.4% target, but allows developments that go against community plans in suburban villages, where it is easy to develop, it may lose its new homes bonus. Furthermore, he said: “To encourage more effective planning, we will also consider withholding payments for homes that are built following an appeal.” This is centralism; it goes against localism. I urge him to think again. Councils should determine such appeals on their merit, not on the basis of central Government diktat.

Sajid Javid: I assure my hon. Friend that the new homes bonus will stay in place. The reforms that we have announced today were consulted on; I think the consultation began in December 2015. It is important to make sure that the incentives for local authorities to promote house building remain, not least to deal with some of the local pressure for more homes in their area. He mentioned the national baseline figure of 0.4%, which councils must meet or exceed. He may be reassured to know that that is based on historical numbers, and that the figure for the country last year was 0.94%, so most local authorities will still be able to benefit from the new homes bonus. I listened carefully to what he said about the possible change in relation to appeals, which we will consider in the consultation.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): How will Hull be in a better position to meet local needs when the Secretary of State’s announcement of a 1% increase in the precept that the council can levy will bring in only £700,000, or just 12% of what Hull actually needs to address its social care budget following the massive cuts since 2010? Wealthier areas such as the East Riding can raise much more from their council tax base, and they have many more self-funders, so how is that fair? The Government are not giving Hull what it requires to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable people in one of the most disadvantaged areas of the country.

Sajid Javid: Hull, the area the hon. Lady mentioned, will benefit from these changes. She mentioned the change in the precept, which is important; I do not have the exact number for Hull at hand, but it will help. I notice that she did not mention the money going into the new homes bonus. The new homes bonus is allocated on the basis of relative need and takes into account the ability of local areas to raise money through taxes. As it is based on relative need, it will benefit places such as Hull.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I agree with my right hon. Friend that this is an opportunity to be bold and to use bottom-up thinking. I welcome the fair funding review, but does he not agree that until that review is completed and we have a fuller picture of what local authorities can afford and what central Government are prepared to provide—taking into account the demographic pressures in various parts of the country, such as mine in Devon—there should be a moratorium on the loss of community hospital beds?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend highlights the need for the fair funding review. I hope he agrees with me that it is about time we looked carefully at the needs of every local area, including the more rural areas, and make sure that the way funding is distributed takes into account all the challenges that those areas face. For example, in rural areas, sparsity creates more challenges and funding pressures. He will be aware that my predecessor listened to such arguments and, despite his limited flexibility, took action where he could, with a £65 million rural services delivery grant for 2017-18. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that in the fair funding review, we will need to look carefully at the pressures, particularly in rural areas, and make sure that we act on them.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We will take no lectures from this Government about funding for social care. They walked away from the cross-party negotiations on the funding of social care before the 2010 election, purely for political gain, and they then cut £4.6 billion from social care during the last Parliament. The crisis we have now was created by the people sitting on the Government Benches. A 1% increase in the precept will bring in £670,000 in my local authority, but we already have a £14 million deficit in our expenditure. This is not going to touch the sides, as the leader of my local authority has said. It is just not good enough. We have a gaping hole, and the Secretary of State has come to the House with a sticking plaster. It is just not good enough. We need cross-party agreement on how to deal with this crisis.

Sajid Javid: It is worth reminding the hon. Gentleman that at the last election he stood on a ticket that would have led to even less funding for his local authority, which I believe is Greenwich, and lower funding for the NHS as well. He should keep that in mind when he considers today’s announcement. He should welcome the fact that the Government have not only made more available in the spending review, but have announced an additional £900 million today. Just for next year alone, that will mean a minimum of an additional £3.1 million for his local authority.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The discussion on this statement is rather sad, because there is too much party political point scoring on a very important
issue. I agree entirely with the excellent Chairman of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and with the former care Minister, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, that we need a policy with genuine cross-party support. This is not a party issue, and I urge the Secretary of State at least to explore the possibility of cross-party working on this issue.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to say that the more we can all co-operate, put aside party politics and deal with this issue for the long term—there are some significant long-term challenges in the sector—the better off we will all be, and our constituents would thank us for doing that.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): The most crippling cuts are being planned in Walsall borough, because the allocation from central Government has been nearly halved in the past six years. Does the Secretary of State not understand that I am talking about an area—my area—where there is so much deprivation and poverty? The cuts next year will be even higher than previous ones, so I want to ask: why is there a Tory onslaught on this borough, and when is this war going to end?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that all councils across the country, without exception, have been asked to find efficiencies and make savings, and many of them have done so in very innovative and clever ways. For example, sharing services means that some of them have been able to maintain the level of services, but at a lower cost to taxpayers. He mentioned his borough of Walsall; it, like many other areas, needs to do things better and deliver services in a better way where it can, but he will see an increase in core spending power by the end of this Parliament, and the changes to adult social care budgets that we have announced today will also help his borough.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the money, but I also add my voice to those who are concerned about the long-term sustainability of social care. As the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister’s Question Time, this is a short-term, medium-term and long-term issue. The Secretary of State will know that rural areas have issues not only of sparsity, but of delivery. Will he assure me of two things: first, that he will not take his foot off the gas in ensuring that we find long-term solutions; and secondly, that he will work cross-departmentally, because it is important that we have joined-up Government as well as joined-up opinions on this issue?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely assure my hon. Friend that adult social care will remain a priority, not just for me and the Health Secretary, who was here for the statement, but across Government. This issue is well understood by the Government. That is why we have been able to listen and take the action we have announced today. My hon. Friend is right to say that although this action meets the short-term need of particular cash pressures, which were rightly identified, we also need to think about the medium term and the longer term.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): As the Prime Minister mentioned yesterday, Newcastle City Council performs well on social care in the face of continued punitive cuts, but that will all be put at risk if the Government do not act responsibly to plug the £15 million funding gap. Today’s plan relies on local areas being able to build new homes and raise local taxes to solve a crisis in social care funding. Can the Secretary of State not see that this will entrench inequality across the country and that it is playing politics with vulnerable people’s lives?

Sajid Javid: The statement has just been made, and when the hon. Lady has the time to look at it at a bit more closely, she will see that it does not rely on building new homes to get more adult social care—nothing of the sort. Perhaps that was not clear earlier and I am glad that she has raised it, because if she thought that, others might be thinking the same. The £240 million comes from the new homes bonus budget. That money will no longer go into that budget and has been transferred to adult social care budgets across the country on the basis of the relative needs formula. It will certainly benefit Newcastle upon Tyne and other areas.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The Secretary of State is right to point out that this is not wholly a question of money. He mentioned Oxfordshire in his statement. Does he agree that in Oxfordshire, the problems with delayed discharges and care are being solved by a greater use of care home beds, and that we need to see more of that sort of imaginative approach?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I am glad he highlights that point. This issue is not just about money. Of course resources play an important role, and today’s announcement helps with that, but it is also about finding a better way to deliver services. One of the key things that is required is more integration between health and social care, and Oxfordshire is an excellent example of that.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Since 2011-12, Nottingham City Council, which as the Secretary of State knows serves a population with high levels of deprivation, has seen its spending power reduced by 23%, while more prosperous areas have seen their funding rise. As the King’s Fund has shown, the precept will further widen those inequalities. Nottingham city organisations recently won a Health Service Journal award for the quality of their partnership working on integrating health and social care, but the portfolio holder describes them as at “breaking point”. I listened carefully to the Secretary of State’s answer to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). Will he confirm whether he will take up the offer of a cross-party review to tackle the crisis in social care funding—yes or no?

Sajid Javid: Turning first to Nottinghamshire, the hon. Lady is right to highlight Nottingham as an example of an area that, through the precept, cannot raise as much as even some of its neighbouring areas. That is why the better care fund, which is already in place, takes account of the tax-raising powers that are available locally. Beyond the precept, the other allocation I have talked about today, the £240 million fund, will be based on need, which will mean a relative benefit for Nottingham.
Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I agree with him on the importance of the new homes bonus. As the name suggests, it is a bonus and not something that councils should rely on for day-to-day spending. That is why we do not include it in our core spending power calculations. Nevertheless, it is important, not least to meet the added pressures brought by the homes. He also talked about ensuring that the incentives are working properly, including in Devon, and I am happy to discuss that with him further.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State recognise that additional precept in an area with a low council tax base raises drastically less than in more prosperous areas? The better care fund goes nowhere near plugging that gap. The Secretary of State is therefore denying tens of thousands of older people the home care and social care services that they desperately need.

Sajid Javid: I am afraid that I have to disagree with the hon. Gentleman. The better care fund goes a long way to plugging the gap. Let me remind him of the overall numbers: the spending review set out £3.5 billion of new spending by 2020, £2 billion of which would come from precepts, and £1.5 billion a year from the better care fund. It was designed precisely to plug the gap. I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that, in today’s announcement, not all the money is through precepts. One of the reasons for the £240 million fund that is allocated on needs is to acknowledge that gap.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Despite council tax bills doubling under the last Labour Government, there was no long-term solution to the problem of funding adult social care. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if we are ever to make real progress, we need a long-term solution based on the Conservative principle of self-reliance, and we need to encourage people, as far as possible, to provide for themselves?

Sajid Javid: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. He kindly reminded the House of Labour’s track record and of how taxes increased. He rightly said that council tax doubled in the 13 years of the last Labour Government. During those years, they had a manifesto commitment to deal with adult social care, a royal commission in 1999, two Green Papers in 2005 and 2009, a comprehensive spending review and the Wanless review. All that, they said, would solve the adult social care challenges, and all they did was make it much worse.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): First, I want to say that the 1% rise in the precept in Redcar and Cleveland will raise just £500,000, which is meaningless given the scale of the rising demand in need. I want to
ask the Secretary of State two questions because the answers were not clear from his rather rushed statement. The first is about the new homes bonus, and the key words are “the savings from the reforms”, not the new homes bonus. If it is just the savings from the reforms, that is not an awful lot of money, so I hope that he can clarify that.

Secondly, is the Secretary of State saying that local authorities will keep what they make in the new homes bonus, or will it be distributed nationwide from one pot on a needs basis? If it is the latter, yet again he reinforces the inequality that already exists in this country, because the new homes bonus is based on council tax rates.

Sajid Javid: I can tell the hon. Lady that for her local council, Redcar and Cleveland, the precept next year could raise £2.2 million, and the following year it could raise £3.4 million. The numbers are considerably higher than she may think at the moment.

On the new homes bonus, let me be clear: it is being reformed, but it is staying in place. The bonus that is currently equivalent to six years’ band D council tax will fall gradually from five years to four years, but the essential principles remain the same. The savings that are generated from that change from six years to four years are national savings—that is the £240 million pot—and will be distributed nationally across authorities that provide social care services. That will be based on a needs formula.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Both Corby Borough Council and East Northamptonshire Council are firmly engaging with the Government’s housing growth agenda. Will my right hon. Friend undertake to consult them fully on any proposed changes to the new homes bonus, because it is essential that infrastructure and services keep up with the pace of housing growth? I particularly say that because the level of development is so significant in our area and because it is focused on urban extensions, and the costs associated with those are inevitably high.

Sajid Javid: Again, my hon. Friend highlights the importance of the new homes bonus to meet some of those additional pressures. By having the reform, we have made sure that we keep the principle of helping those authorities that are doing the right thing and building those homes. My hon. Friend asked me specifically about consulting on the changes. I should point out that the consultation has happened: it started in December 2015 and is now complete. However, I said that there was a potential new change, which concerns whether the new homes bonus should be available if planning permission is granted on appeal, and we will consult on that.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): This morning, children in Birmingham woke up to a £20 million cut in their schools funding. My son’s school already has more than 30 children in every class. He has special educational needs provision, which will now be taken away. That was done following what Government Members might call the “shroud waving” by Conservative Back Benchers about the underfunding of schools in their areas. I am therefore here to tell the Secretary of State that the social care funding disparity in this country deserves exactly the same redistribution. In his constituency of Bromsgrove, the older adult weekly rate in social care homes is £100 less than in the constituency of the Secretary of State for Health in Surrey. Will the Secretary of State stand here in front of me and tell me that it is okay that his constituents already get £100 a week less than those of his Front-Bench colleagues who live in still leafier areas?

Sajid Javid: In rightly referring to her constituency in Birmingham, the hon. Lady mentioned my constituency of Bromsgrove, which is next door. I think that she was somehow trying to demonstrate that Bromsgrove gets more per head on average.

Jess Phillips: No. Bromsgrove gets less than Surrey.

Sajid Javid: I am comparing Bromsgrove with Birmingham and it gets on average a lot less per head than Birmingham. I assure the hon. Lady that that is noticed locally. I guess her wider point was about fairness in the allocation of funding. She knows that some areas have less power to raise money locally through the precept because of the size of their council tax base, and that is precisely why we have introduced the better care fund. Today’s announcement will help Birmingham significantly through the precept, but Birmingham will also benefit from the additional £240 million, which is allocated on need.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I welcome the announcement of the fair funding review, for which my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) has been pushing for a long time. I also welcome the additional funding that has been announced today, but I add my voice to those who call for a proper, cross-party solution to this extremely important issue.

Has my right hon. Friend managed to discuss with the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), the issue in Staffordshire, where problems with the better care fund are leading to substantial reductions in, for example, drug and alcohol services, which will inevitably place greater burdens on adult social care and the NHS?

Sajid Javid: First, my hon. Friend highlights the importance of the fair funding review being thorough and looking at all the issues carefully, and I wholeheartedly agree. He also echoed the Chamber’s desire, which I welcome, for all parties to work together on adult social care, given its importance to all our constituents. He asked me particularly about the problem in Staffordshire. The Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton, is looking at the matter, and I am discussing it with him.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I had an email this morning from a constituent, a retired gentleman called John, who lives in West Kirby. He points out that not only will a 3% social precept on council tax have an unfair impact across the country, as several of my colleagues have mentioned, but councils cannot start collecting it until April, by which time winter will be over. What action will the Secretary of State take to tackle the winter crisis?
Sajid Javid: Although the hon. Lady is absolutely right that the change we have announced today is for the next tax year—as she rightly indicated, it begins in April—and the following one, I know it is hugely welcome for many local authorities because it allows them to plan. Those were the two particular years for which local authorities felt they had the biggest gap because, as a result of the way in which the better care fund was profiled, the £1.5 billion in full does not kick in until towards the end of this Parliament. The planning that can now be done, and the certainty that that will provide, will immediately help to allay some concerns in local areas. In her area of Wirral, the precept increase for 2017-18, starting in April, will raise £1.4 million; in the following year it will be £8.3 million. That will make a considerable difference.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that improving efficiencies must be a priority when considering the financial settlement? Will he outline any proposed measures to encourage local authorities to move from a two-tier structure to a unitary one?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend’s general point about efficiencies is absolutely correct. That is why I have today praised those local authorities that have shown they can spend less money and in many cases improve public services. I have also talked about the work my Department and the Department of Health are doing together on the integration of adult social care and promoting that more locally.

My hon. Friend asked specifically about the structure of local authorities. The Government are very responsive to that. We will listen to local authorities. A number have started coming forward with plans, and we will look at each one of those very carefully.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Today, as every day, more than 300 people will present at the accident and emergency department at Addenbrooke’s, the hospital that serves Cambridge, 50% more than there were just a few years ago. Shamefully, at least 60 of them will not be seen within four hours; it is almost 1 o’clock, so they will not be seen until at least 5 o’clock this afternoon. That is because of the problem with delayed transfers of care, which in turn is a problem because Cambridgeshire County Council chose not to use the precept this year. I think it is highly likely that that will occur in lots of other places next year, because it will be county council election year; that will mean that the money will not be available in lots of places. The Secretary of State is in a unique position to tackle the crisis. I urge him not to pass the buck to local government but to listen to Members from across the House. He has expressed some warm words, but can I pin him down and ask him what he is actually going to do about this?

Sajid Javid: I hope the hon. Gentleman agrees with me and believes in the power of localism and of letting local people, through their elected representatives, make decisions for their local areas. That is the job of local government; the precept provides flexibility, and today we have provided even more, but the decisions should be made at the local level. That is important.

The hon. Gentleman will know that Cambridgeshire and Peterborough have reached a devolution deal. By May next year, they will have a directly elected mayor. As well as economic growth and more productivity, part of the deal is about seeing whether there can be better management and delivery of public services.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Last, but certainly not least, I call Huw Merriman.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think there are about the same number of people here as there were when I first started bobbing.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Does the hon. Gentleman want me to take them again?

Huw Merriman: No, Sir. I was recently told that in my constituency town of Bexhill we have more over-85s than any other town in the whole of western Europe. Many of those constituents will have moved from other counties to East Sussex to downsize. As a result, council tax increases are a challenge not just for them but for those in the rest of East Sussex. May I therefore thank the Secretary of State for the extra funding for East Sussex and for listening to the concerns of East Sussex MPs? When he looks at the bold reform for social care, will he consider whether national funding for social care will help to alleviate the demographic issues I have in East Sussex?

Sajid Javid: First, I thank my hon. Friend for his words. He highlights the important issue of having the right balance between national funding for adult social care, provided through the various grants, and local funding, through council tax. The changes we have announced and the increased flexibility on the precept will help East Sussex, his local authority, as will the changes in the grant, and the extra £240 million. What he clearly implied is absolutely correct: this is welcome short-term news, but there is a much longer-term issue, and the Government will be concentrating on that.
Points of Order

12.54 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) rose—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have two points of order that are exactly the same, more or less, from Chris Stephens and Stewart Malcolm McDonald. But okay, let us start with Chris Stephens.

Chris Stephens: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. First of all, I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and my position as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be aware that an issue exercising Members who represent the great city of Glasgow is the proposal to close half its jobcentres. Yesterday my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) raised in a point of order the fact that it was day seven with no information at all referring to this matter on the website of the Department for Work and Pensions. Today is day eight with no information on the DWP website about a public consultation on the proposed closure of half the jobcentres in our city. That is of great concern. We are now entering the Christmas and new year period, when public consultation is already curtailed.

The consultation is a morass. In my view, it shows contempt not only for hon. Members of this House but for the general public. Mr Deputy Speaker, can you advise me whether a Minister could come before the House today to outline the processes of public consultation on the proposed jobcentre closures in the great city of Glasgow?

Mr Deputy Speaker: My understanding is that this was dealt with from the Chair yesterday, when it was fully aired. I have great sympathy and recognise the importance of the matter. I think the hon. Gentleman is aware that there is a debate at 4.30 pm on Tuesday in Westminster Hall, which I think will be the right avenue to pursue the matter. It is certainly back on the record.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. When I raised this issue during business questions earlier, I think the Leader of the House inadvertently misled Members by claiming at the Dispatch Box that the DWP was actively consulting on the proposed jobcentre closures in the great city of Glasgow.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is not a matter for the Chair to correct the record. If there was an inaccuracy or misstatement, the hon. Gentleman has put the point that what was said was not correct. But it is a matter for the Leader of the House. I am sure he feels that if it was wrong it is up to him to correct it. If nothing else, the Chamber is aware of the issue, as am I. As I said just before, there is a debate next Tuesday. I am sure that this will not have gone away, and the hon. Gentleman will be able to bring his point forward once again.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I need to bring a very troubling matter to the House's attention. One issue that has exercised us has been the activities of corporate lobbyists, which at times have cast a dark shadow over the political process. A brief was circulated on 13 December by the British Beer and Pub Association, which represents the large pub companies and wishes its members to be allowed to continue to convert pubs into supermarkets without needing planning permission. The briefing the association circulated to some MPs made an entirely false claim, which was then repeated by the Minister for Housing and Planning at the Dispatch Box as a reason for not accepting a new clause to a Bill; hon. Members were clearly influenced by the briefing in the way they voted. The Minister said on Tuesday:

“An briefing note from the British Beer and Pub Association makes the point that removing permitted development would not only stop the conversion of pubs to supermarkets and whatever else we would want to stop, but might prevent pubs from doing improvement works to their premises, which we clearly would not want.”

I challenged the Minister, who then said:

“I am well aware of what the BBPA is, but I tend to take the approach that, when I see briefings, I look at the points they make. If they make a sensible point, they are worth looking at. The BBPA makes a serious point.”—[Official Report, 13 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 744.]

No—the BBPA made an entirely false claim. It is very troubling that civil servants did this, but this corrupts the legislative process—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Points of order are meant to be short. They are not meant to be speeches that go through the whole of the debate. [Interruption.] Does the hon. Gentleman want a reply, or should I move on to the next point of order? May I just ask Members to please try to bring points of order to the attention of the House briefly and quickly?

If there is something significantly wrong in what the Minister for Housing and Planning said, I am sure, knowing his good character, he will want to put the record straight. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) has brought this matter to the attention of the House and it is now on the record. As he well knew when he raised the point of order, this is not a matter for the Chair, but we have allowed it. It is on the record and it is now up to the Minister to reflect on what he has said. I am not going to continue the debate. I am going to move on. I have another point of order to deal with.

Greg Mulholland: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is not the same point of order, is it?

Greg Mulholland: I merely ask your advice about the corruption of the legislative process, which was clearly inadvertent on the part of the Minister. What can we do to make the British Beer and Pub Association apologise, and to stop this kind of corruption of our legislative process in future?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I cannot do that as the Chair. I am not here to decide whether it was correct or incorrect. What I will say is that it was quite right for the hon.
Gentleman to put it on the record. It is there for all to see and to recognise. I know the Minister well. If he was significantly wrong, I am sure he will want to put that right. I cannot do more than that. I am not responsible for accuracies or inaccuracies. I can only help by trying to see how we can move the matter on. I do not think the hon. Member for Leeds North West can do more than he has done today. I know the good Member, so I do not think he will give up on this matter—that is the one thing on which I rest assured.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sorry I have not given you notice of this point of order, but it occurred today. We had two very important departmental Question Times: the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for International Trade. We tried to cram in, in an hour, two Departments, with topical questions lasting only seven minutes. It clearly did not work. I am pleased the Leader of the House is in his place. Many Members were left disappointed and unable to scrutinise the Departments, which is what they came in to do. I am not sure whether this is something you control, Mr Deputy Speaker, or whether it is some other organisation, but it would seem sensible if we could go back to having an hour for DCMS questions and an hour for International Trade questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman knows, this is not a matter for the Chair, but it is certainly a matter for the usual channels. I am sure they can have a discussion and reflect on it. There is a nod from the Leader of the House. I know what a great man he is and I am sure that that will all be looked into as a matter of course and duty.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Leader of the House is now present. Further to my earlier point of order, I wonder whether you would allow him to correct the record.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If the Leader of the House wishes to do so, I am always willing to hear him, but if not—[Interruption.] It is up to the Leader of the House. As much as the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) wants to entice the Leader of the House, it is for the Leader of the House to choose.

The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) has been very, very patient. His patience is now running thin. He has been up and down waiting to present his Bill—he is going to wear out the carpet!

BILL PRESENTED

DIABETES INPATIENT CARE

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Keith Vaz presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to ensure that all diabetic patients are identified on admittance to hospital and have their diabetes condition monitored while in hospital by a specialist diabetes team; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February 2017, and to be printed (Bill 115).
of that is due to the underperformance of the small business sector. It is not just individual businesses that have been affected by mis-selling and the lack of resolution. It has carried on to a lack of investment in new businesses, and it has been an additional factor in important entrepreneurs withdrawing from the business process. Unless we find a permanent resolution, we will not be able to create the economic growth that I know all of us in this House hope to see.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend is right that a number of Members have constituency cases. He will be aware of my constituent, Mr Neil Mitchell, whose business was forced into administration by the RBS Global Restructuring Group. He finds himself almost in the role of whistleblower by trying to take private legal action. Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment at the lack of willingness of RBS to engage in dispute resolution, in particular the unwillingness of the chief executive to meet my constituent personally? Does he share my hope that the proposals in the motion, which I was glad to sponsor, can be taken forward?

George Kerevan: I take my hon. Friend’s point. There are so many individual cases. They cut across all the nations of the United Kingdom and Members of all parties. My plea to the Minister is that we desperately need to find a permanent resolution.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): My hon. Friend made a good point about encouraging small businesses. It is important that we get a fair deal for small businesses. He will be aware of the case of my constituent, Mr Jim McGrory, who was looking to refinance at a preferential rate, but was faced with high exit fees and termination clauses that had not been made clear in the terms and conditions. That is crucial for small businesses, and it was crucial for Mr McGrory.

George Kerevan: Indeed. That brings us to the nub of the issue: the imbalance in power between an individual small business and a bank.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I have a constituent in a similar situation to the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins). My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) is right to talk about an imbalance. My constituent’s business was put under by the Royal Bank of Scotland. He found that taking legal action was almost impossible, because RBS, bailed out by the taxpayer, was in a much stronger financial position than he was. My hon. Friend’s suggestion of an alternative mechanism gives at least a real chance for these businesses to take on the massive banks, which the public have bailed out.

George Kerevan: Indeed. It is clear in Scotland—it might be true of other parts of the UK—that the major banks have signed up many solicitors, making it almost impossible for someone to find a lawyer to represent them, even if they want to take action against a bank, difficult as that would be, given the financial ability they wield in court.

Norman Lamb: Does the hon. Gentleman also agree that the absence of a clear dispute resolution process actually incentivizes bad behaviour and sharp practice? If the banks know that there is no proper mechanism to challenge wrongdoing, it encourages that bad behaviour.

George Kerevan: For that reason, having been reasonably accommodating, I will press on to the nub of my argument.

For a permanent resolution of the problem, we need three different mechanisms. First, we need a shift in the legal onus on banks to provide a duty of care or good faith in how they deal with customers, particularly business customers. That is open for broad debate—over the years, the banks have been unwilling to accept a narrow duty of care—but we need to redress the balance between major banks and small business clients by providing a mechanism around the legal onus on banks. I would even accept it, initially, if the banks collectively were prepared to come forward with a solution themselves. Secondly, given that many small companies end up insolvent, we need a more balanced insolvency practice to remove the possibility of banks or lenders being tempted to force small and medium-sized enterprises into unnecessary or premature insolvency. Finally, we need a new permanent and effective redress system for banks and small businesses in dispute. In effect, putting those three together, we need to change bank culture.

In order, I hope, to build some common ground with the Minister, I should acknowledge that the Government have already moved some way in recognising this issue. The Government’s impact assessment on the establishment of a small business commissioner in the Enterprise Act 2016 reads:

“The Government is concerned that for small firms, negotiating a contract with a larger business can be challenging... Government has been told that small businesses often feel intimidated and accept such terms (rather than walking away from a proposed contract or refusing to agree to a change) and there is concern that larger firms”...

for that, read “banks”...

“sometimes use their market power to impose unfavourable terms.”

That, I think, is what lay behind the issue of the hedging products sold to small businesses during the economic boom in 2006 to 2008. The Government have recognised the general problem, therefore; it is just a matter of how we resolve it.

Just to show that there is a broader political agreement on this, from right and left, I want to quote the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Cumborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who wrote a piece for the Free Enterprise Group three years ago, entitled “Defending the rights of those who take risks”, in which he wrote:
"Over the years...the banks have contractually extended their rights through their 'standard terms and conditions'... to give LPA—
the Law of Property Act 1925—
"receives general powers of sale, to set aside the limit on the fees that a receiver may charge and to load all associated costs on to the borrower. They have even moved to grant themselves the right to peaceably re-enter properties over which they have a charge without any recourse to the courts. The contractual extension of power taken by the banks goes well beyond what was originally envisaged in the Law of Property Act 1925."

In other words, the banks have gradually extended their powers of receivership, making it increasingly difficult for small companies in financial difficulties to get redress, and leading to the situation with RBS's Global Restructuring Group, which has now re-entered the public domain with the initial report from the Financial Conduct Authority.

I expect the Minister to tell us that ultimately, if there is to be a change in the redress process, it has to come from the FCA. To that end, the all-party group on fair business banking has been consulting the FCA, and subsequent to that, I raised the matter with Mr Andrew Bailey, its new chief executive, when he appeared before the Treasury Committee. I asked if he drew any relevant conclusions from the FCA's experience with the banks in drawing up ad hoc processes of redress for the various mis-selling schemes, and he said that he did. He said that the problem arose where schemes lay "outside the regulatory perimeter"—much of the mis-selling was of unregulated products—but that the FCA had learnt from the experience, having come late to it, that businesses felt they had not had their day in court. He went on:

"...Now, they do not want to have a literal day in court because that is obviously very expensive. However, what I conclude from this is that it..."

the ad hoc procedures—

"is not satisfactory from the point of view of the FCA, because the FCA has been involved in creating a lot of bespoke processes. We discussed this on the board a number of times. Were there to be a mechanism that could substitute for these—let us loosely call it a tribunal, for the sake of argument—rather like the ombudsman but for more complex cases, because corporate cases often are more complex, this would be a big step forward. From the point of view of the things that come out, we are creating a lot of work for ourselves. However, I am very sympathetic to the people involved, so we have to do it. However, if there were to be a process that could substitute for this...I think this would be a big step forward."

We are proposing the idea of a tribunal. At this stage, it is a generic proposal, and there are issues to be discussed. It would, for example, cross the boundaries of the devolved Administrations, so if we went down this road, there might have to be separate institutional tribunal procedures in Scotland. There are also financial issues, but since we are dealing with redress where the FCA has decided that a bank has been involved in mis-selling—in other words, since we are already in the territory where a bank is going to pay—any permanent tribunal system could be funded by the banks. The all-party group is open to a general discussion with the Government about how to proceed, but the general backing from the FCA is there; it is just a matter of the detail.

This is important because the issue has not gone away. The situation with RBS GRG is coming back into the public domain. RBS has put forward a new ad hoc procedure for dealing with complaints from small businesses put into GRG. We have advance notice of a report, not yet finalised by the FCA, in which, having taken technical advice, it has clearly found a conflict of interest in how RBS handled the cases of companies put into GRG: the part of the bank taking over and reselling properties from the insolvent companies was part of GRG. In effect, therefore, the bank was putting companies into insolvency, taking their property and handing it over to another part of the bank, and generating cash that way.

Given that this issue has reappeared and that there is a public debate over the nature of the redress system, we are not looking at legacy items; we are looking at a future situation in which the Royal Bank of Scotland is creating an ad hoc redress system that we need to ensure is a correct one.

I know that other Members want to participate in the debate. The bottom line for the Minister is that there is now an ongoing process of debate and a general consensus, even from the FCA, that we need a more permanent resolution system and that we need to go beyond just looking at insolvency law. The door is open for the Government to join the rest of us on both sides of the House to ensure that that resolution process is provided.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): As I said, we will have a voluntary limit of up to eight minutes. If it is not voluntary, it will have to be imposed.

1.20 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan). I congratulate him and I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on granting the debate. I rise to speak as chairman of the all-party group on alternative dispute resolution. We are about to embark, in tandem with the hon. Gentleman's all-party group, on an inquiry into precisely what he has proposed in the debate. We will be looking at the sort of dispute resolution that could be put into place for these sort of disputes.

I want to concentrate on the part of the motion that refers to the creation of

"not ad hoc compensation schemes, but a long-term, effective and timely dispute resolution mechanism"

that can be used to help solve these sort of issues. The hon. Member for East Lothian has set out admirably the reason for doing that, but I would say that the dispute mechanism already exists in the form of the alternative dispute resolution regime. I shall say more about that.

Businesses, including small and medium-sized enterprises, are left with no option except prohibitively expensive appearances in court. One of the great advantages that the alternative dispute resolution system brings is the potential to reduce the costs involved. This is not something that is strange to the financial services sector. A large number of commercial sectors automatically include alternative dispute resolution clauses within their commercial contracts.

The all-party group held a meeting on this recently, where we went through subject by subject, looking at how ADR could be incorporated within the system and used more often. We looked at the commercial area in quite substantial detail. One of the great things we were able to do was to bring together quite a disparate body of people who operate in the ADR field to see whether
there were some common threads between them in approaching disputes such as those the hon. Gentleman mentioned and taking them forward.

The good news is that there was quite a lot of agreement about what we were aiming for, even though some of the methods of getting there were slightly different. For us, ADR includes arbitration, mediation, adjudication, expert determination, dispute boards and online dispute resolution. We also looked at examples to see how those elements could be—some already are—incorporated by financial services sectors in their contracts. The good news is that these were already being incorporated into contracts, so what we needed to do was to put pressure on the sectors to include them as a matter of course in their contracts, because that would help to solve these disputes.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman clarify which sectors of the financial services he is referring to? Is it the retail sector or the business-to-business sector that is incorporating ADR? I have not seen many commercial contracts with ADR clauses in them from the banks.

John Howell: From memory, I think it was the business-to-business sector primarily, but there is absolutely no reason why it cannot include the business-to-retail sector as well. There is a great deal of ability for individuals to bring quite complex cases in a way that does not involve going to the courts, as I shall explain.

We are running out of time, so I shall deal with the issue right now. We all know that trying to bring a case to court is a very expensive business. It requires extremely expensive lawyers. What the arbitration or mediation process holds out is the ability for an individual to sit in arbitration and mediation between people in order to bring the dispute to a much earlier resolution. It could be said that this does not take away the need for a court to be involved, which is absolutely true, because the awards of the arbitration panel or the mediator have to be enforced by the courts. However, that is a long-stop for the ADR process, and I think we will see it being brought into play more infrequently.

Of course, Lord Justice Briggs has commented that he would prefer to see “alternative dispute resolutions” not called that—he wants the “alternative” taken out so that they are called “dispute resolutions”. I think that fits well with our own view of things. The other side is the issue of time and stress involved in taking forward cases within this sort of framework. It is absolutely true that the arbitration and mediation process takes away a lot of the stress of appearing in court and allows these sort of issues to be settled in a much more friendly way.

I look forward to the work that our two all-party groups will do on this issue. I think that the framework is already there, and I think we need to encourage banks to include clauses within their commercial contracts so that we can get back to ADR becoming the standard mechanism for resolving disputes, rather than using the internal complaints procedures of the companies as the starting point and the ending point of the discussion that takes place on these issues. On that note, I am happy to allow another Member to continue the debate.

1.27 pm

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), a fellow member of the Justice Committee and chair of the all-party group on alternative dispute resolution, of which I am a member. I welcome his contribution, and the motion in the name of the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan), to which I was pleased to add my name, as a Labour MP. I support its objectives on a cross-party basis.

The issue is of great importance, and the Minister has a duty to the House to respond in a positive way to the very straightforward demand made by Members today—a demand that we establish a universal mechanism that allows businesses and others in non-regulated sectors an appeals mechanism, so that they can have an independent review of their situation. The motion is important, and I support it. The demands are clear, and have not come out of the blue. The motion clearly refers to the statement made by Andrew Bailey of the Financial Conduct Authority to the Treasury Committee on 20 July 2016. He said that we needed to look at the fact that “the ad hoc creation of a compensation scheme within the FCA” had not worked, and that there was no mechanism in place for many businesses—Members will no doubt mention them today—to find a resolution. Remember, these are small businesses facing big banks that have the time, money, expertise and often patience to try to see out the complaints being made. The motion, which calls for an effective, sustainable platform for resolving commercial financial disputes, is therefore absolutely right and timely.

Although many financial firms may be regulated, business and commercial banking remains an unregulated activity in the UK. Businesses do not have the same level of protection as consumers; they have to rely on internal complaints procedures and on the Financial Ombudsman Service, which may not be well equipped to deal with some of these cases. Businesses have to consider the potential for expensive, protracted activity through the courts. All of this effectively militates against fairness when opportunities have been denied or wrongs done.

I am particularly concerned about the Royal Bank of Scotland, which remains in public ownership. We taxpayers still endorse and act on behalf of the bank. The Minister has to look at not just the complaints procedure proposed by the hon. Member for East Lothian on behalf of the all-party group on fair business banking, but the Government’s responsibility, on behalf of every taxpayer, for the services provided by, and the attitudes and responses of, a bank that remains owned by me, my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on the Front Bench and every Member of this House.

This matters because over 12,000 companies were pushed into RBS’s controversial turnaround division, called the Global Restructuring Group. We are talking about real pressures and real actions affecting real businesses, and the bank having acted unfairly. Indeed, it has now recognised that it acted unfairly and has provided a compensation scheme of its own, but there is no independent scrutiny of it, and not necessarily any independent endorsement of it yet, because as the hon. Member for East Lothian said, this has not yet been finalised. RBS has a major commitment to those 12,000 businesses.
This also matters because of cases such as that of my constituent Clive May of Mold in Flintshire, north Wales. With his permission, I will detail his case. He experienced first hand the actions of RBS in relation to the Government-sponsored enterprise finance guarantee scheme. Mr May was the owner of a successful business employing 100 people in north Wales. It was a construction company, building houses and factories. The company had banked with RBS for many years when Mr May was approached by RBS and asked to take up the EFG scheme, which was designed by the Labour Government to support the growth—not the closing down—of businesses through the difficult times of the recession between 2008 and 2010.

Mr May believed that the enterprise finance guarantee scheme would support the expansion of his business. He was informed that his overdraft, for which he had always met his responsibilities, and which was not excessive, as he could meet the liabilities, was to be taken over by the EFG scheme, and that his business’s cash flow would therefore be protected and developed. That was a falsehood on the part of RBS, because the moment he took up the EFG scheme, RBS placed the company in its distressed department and cut his overdraft.

Norman Lamb: It has been a pleasure to work with the right hon. Gentleman on what I regard as a scandal. Surely he is making the incredibly serious allegation that not only was an individual destroyed, but there was misuse of public money.

Mr Hanson: Absolutely, and I make that allegation here today. RBS has acted appallingly in its treatment of my constituent. Before Mr May took up the EFG, his business was making new contracts, had excellent cash flow, and never once went over its agreed overdraft limit. The moment Mr May took part in the EFG scheme, RBS took from the Government the money underpinning that overdraft, closed down his overdraft and ruined his business. That is important because Mr May exemplifies the small business facing the big bank. He and his wife Kerry have spent four years arguing this case—along with me as their Member of Parliament—having meetings with RBS, and looking at court cases, and now at criminal activity, which has been reported to North Wales police, because there are allegations of fraud. That is also being looked at by the Crown Prosecution Service, which is reviewing the case. All of that is because of concerns about how RBS has acted, but there is no mechanism to drag this case forward apart from Mr May’s personal determination and will to hold RBS to account. The Financial Services Authority cannot do that; he has to have the will himself, with the support of his family and his MP. That is not acceptable.

That is why I support the proposal of the hon. Member for East Lothian. Mr May’s business and similar businesses need this mechanism to ensure that they get fairness when they face banks such as RBS, which is in public ownership, that treat them with disdain.

1.36 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am very glad to be called to speak in this debate. I support the motion, and congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan), with whom I serve on the Treasury Committee, not just on securing this debate, but on the excellent work he has done in having the initiative to bring forward the all-party group on fair business banking. I am glad to be a vice-chair of it, and am grateful to him for the invitation to take that role. I shall make three points: the first is about incentives; the second is about the cost and accessibility of courts; and the third is about complexity.

I have spoken previously in the House about the incentives for bad behaviour, particularly in relation to accounting under the international financial reporting standards, and liability. It is appropriate that the House is so well packed with Scottish National party Members, because I know at least one of them will be glad to hear that I recently attended an event at the Adam Smith Institute, where I helped launch the book “Legislating Instability: Adam Smith, free banking and the financial crisis of 1772”, by Tyler Beck Goodspeed, a brilliant American economist working in the UK. That event may seem irrelevant, but it goes to the heart of what is wrong today. The book shows that the Scottish banking system, characterised as it was by unlimited strict liability among partners, had very good, strong incentives for the owners and staff of banks to behave well. I am grateful to the hon. Members who are nodding in agreement.

Of course, we have come a long way since then, and we are not about to go back to free banking, much as I would wish us to. I shall quote an actuaries, whom I do not wish to name, who talked about his work:

“I have examined around 100 individual cases, all of which had the same negative qualities. It is a case of bank salesmen deliberately withholding key information about the risks embedded in the “hedging” products they sell. The term “hedging” is therefore itself misleading.

Overall, the process is disgusting. Banks sold derivative products on top of loans to their clients which those banks knew would render them less creditworthy at the point of sale, and therefore render the business more likely to fail. How can this be described as “hedging” by any financial organisation with a scrap of integrity is beyond me.”

I agree. The actuaries went on to say:

“This misleading use of language, unfortunately, is maintained by some of the “experts”, some of whom charge large fees for reports to take into the courts. If these reports miss out on key risks, the cases become far weaker possibly to the point that the case fails. At the best, the bargaining power of victims is much reduced.”

I want to pick up on that experience, because my second point is about the cost and accessibility of the courts system. This points to why our debate is so important. I am sure that the hon. Member for East Lothian has, like me, heard evidence in constituency casework and from the authorities showing that the system that was set up was not adequate to the task in hand. Indeed, I am sure many Members will have constituents whose businesses have been in grave difficulty, and whose lives have been affected, who found that the system failed them.

However well intentioned the authorities were in setting up the system, it has not worked well. We need to find some middle ground between the courts, which are too expensive, complex and bureaucratic, and often either unavailable or too expensive to purchase at quality—and the failed semi-formal system. The court system, its inadequacies and the necessity of avoiding it...
is an old problem—Matthew 5:25 refers to it—and the Government have quite some task ahead of them if they are to deal with this matter.

As for complexity, even Treasury Committee members, who have been elected by the House to deal with such issues, have found derivatives fabulously complex and difficult to follow. If that is true of those of us who are charged with developing the expertise, it will no doubt be true of the small business people who buy the products. To ensure that similar problems do not recur, the Government may want to consider whether small businesses—limits on size is something else to consider—ought to be treated as consumers for regulatory purposes.

I am glad that we are interested in a tribunal system funded by the banks, and that we are open-minded. Although my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) is not in his place, I am grateful that he will be working with the APPG to take things forward. Finally, I again congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) for securing this important debate. As others have rightly pointed out, those most negatively affected by the absence of a financial dispute resolution platform are largely small and medium-sized enterprises. The importance of such businesses to our general economic wellbeing cannot be emphasised enough. Some 67% of all UK workers are employed by small and medium-sized enterprises, which are not protected by the Financial Ombudsman Service. That figure amounts to 17 million employees, or over half the UK’s workforce. As such, it is important to recognise when discussing such businesses, which are at risk of going under owing to the burden of financial disputes, that it is not only the business owners who are at risk: the employees and their families will also feel the knock-on effects.

These vital small businesses face numerous structural challenges not faced by larger businesses. They have far fewer resources, meaning not only finances, but time, labour and information. In addition, they often have far less experience to draw upon than larger, more established businesses. The structural challenges mean that there is a substantial imbalance when SMEs get into financial disputes with large businesses or large banking institutions. The larger party involved in such disputes is inherently at an advantage, both in the context of a dispute resolution outwith the legal system and within the court system.

For small businesses that come into dispute with a financial institution, the first step is to submit a complaint to the institution’s internal complaint procedure, but many SMEs are fearful of even taking that first step. Unfortunately, it is unsurprising that SMEs feel sufficiently intimidated by financial institutions not to submit a complaint when they feel unfairly treated. According to statistics from the Bank of England, total lending from UK banks to other banks has more than quadrupled since 1990. However, lending from UK banks to businesses involved in production has remained stagnant. In addition, the Basel III international capital adequacy regulations, introduced in the wake of the financial crisis, have made lending to SMEs more expensive, further incentivising banks to lend to other banks, rather than to SMEs.

Just last week, I was approached by a small business from my constituency that has developed an innovative new technology that recycles waste and creates clean energy while minimising emissions. It reached out to me because it has struggled to obtain sufficient funding to move forward with the project, despite having built a test facility. That is just one example, but it demonstrates the degree to which small businesses struggle to obtain financing and credit. It is no wonder that many small businesses do not want to submit complaints to a financial institution. With so little credit available to SMEs, it is more than understandable that they want to protect their access to a limited available line of credit, even if it means being treated unfairly.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point, highlighting that the UK’s highly centralised banking model is broken. In addition to considering dispute resolution and firmer protections for businesses, we should look at an alternative banking structure based on community banks, under which banks are ingrained in their communities and know their local businesses.

Philip Boswell: I wholeheartedly agree with that excellent point.

As mentioned in today’s motion, the Financial Conduct Authority has set up several ad hoc schemes to address systemic misconduct by financial institutions. The schemes have been widely criticised, and, as others have mentioned, even Andrew Bailey, the new chief executive of the FCA, has said that they have left those affected by bank misconduct feeling unfairly treated. The recent review of the mis-selling of interest rate hedging products demonstrates the shortfall of the ad-hoc compensation schemes and their inability to reach fair outcomes for customers.

Last year, just before Christmas, I was approached by a constituent who had been mis-sold an interest rate hedging product. In 2001, my constituent and several co-investors used their retirement savings to create a small business that would purchase commercial property in Glasgow. However, they had insufficient capital to purchase their first property outright and therefore sought a loan from a bank. Despite the banks involved with the mis-selling claiming that customers were under no pressure to purchase the product, my constituent informed me that he could not find a single bank that would lend the money without including the interest rate hedging product. My constituent was told that this was to protect the customer in the event of interest rates continuing to rise. Having no other choice, my constituent’s business took out a 25-year loan that included the aforementioned product.

Many in the Chamber will be aware that interest rates fell during the financial crisis. The inclusion of the product in the loan resulted in my constituent’s business—set up on pension scheme earnings—owing £30,000 per quarter in interest alone during the biggest financial crisis in modern history. When it became apparent to
my constituent that his business had been mis-sold the product, he began the complaints process in the hope of receiving some sort of compensation. However, the bank with which he took out the loan continually refused to provide him with the relevant paperwork for the loan, making it difficult for my constituent to continue the process.

George Kerevan: Does my hon. Friend agree that a fundamental problem with the current ad hoc redress system is that it does not allow the complainant access to the information they need? A tribunal system would put the complainant and the bank on an equal footing and allow that information to be made available.

Philip Boswell: I entirely agree. Such a practice is entirely undesirable and not befitting of any bank, particularly one in public ownership, as has been mentioned before.

The delay and avoidance tactics used by the bank, combined with the FCA’s own recommendation that claimants should not take legal action, meant that my constituent’s case surpassed the six-year time limit on taking court action. His business did not receive any compensation from the bank as a result of the ad hoc scheme overseen by the FCA. Unfortunately, my constituent’s experience is far from rare, as many Members have shown. The compensation scheme for the mis-selling of interest rate hedging products was bank-centric and lacked sufficient FCA oversight. The review was set up in conjunction with the banks and allowed them to make redress offers that did not reflect an objectively fair outcome. The case of my constituent and the experiences of others who have been treated unfairly by banks clearly demonstrate the wide scope of financial disputes, particularly those between small businesses and financial institutions.

After hearing about the experiences of constituents from across the UK shared by Members today, it is apparent the ad hoc schemes set up by the FCA have lacked sufficient clarity and that the creation of a commercial financial dispute resolution platform is necessary. I am happy to support the motion presented by my hon. Friend, and I welcome the support that has been expressed in the House today.

1.49 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): It is a privilege to be able to speak to this motion. First, may I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) not only on initiating this debate on our behalf, but on his leadership of the all-party group for fair business and commercial banking, of which I am a vice-chair? I also wish to pay tribute to the former chair of the group, the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), who helped us to set up the “bully banks” all-party group, as it was then, some years ago. Let me read out what he said when we debated these things earlier this year. He said that the FCA “must work with integrity and be independent to deliver in the interests of a healthy financial marketplace.”—[Official Report, 1 February 2016; Vol. 605, c. 715.]

The sad reality for many of my constituents, in a constituency targeted for the selling of interest rate swaps—adverts were taken out in the local newspaper, and at one point we had more than 20 cases of mis-selling of hidden and embedded interest rate swap products—is that they lack confidence in the FCA, based on their experience: the respect and confidence that they should have have dissipated.

As we have heard, the ad-hoc scheme set up by the FCA for interest rate hedging product mis-selling has never had the authority or impartiality that it should have as a model for redress, as was acknowledged by Andrew Bailey in a very welcome admission before the Treasury Committee. The fact that he acknowledges this problem indicates—we hope—that he understands there needs to be reform, and we have heard positive comments from my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian—he is my hon. Friend for these purposes—and from the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell).

The ad-hoc scheme was fundamentally flawed, not just because it was bank-centric and the FCA oversight was not rigorous enough, but because those SMEs that had embedded or hidden swaps were excluded from it. As has been said many times in this place, when the impact of an embedded swap is the same as the impact of a separate hedging product taken out with a loan, it is difficult to argue that the small businesses that were sold those products should be excluded from the scheme—but they were excluded from the scheme and they were denied justice.

Business and commercial banking is an unregulated activity in the UK, and those of us who have been following these matters know that businesses do not have the same level of protection as consumers do. That point was made by the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson). Nor do they have recourse to a timely dispute resolution mechanism—the key word there is “timely”. As we have also heard, banks have deep pockets and recourse to civil litigation is unaffordable for most SMEs—certainly those I represent. Ceredigion has more small businesses per head of population than anywhere else in the UK. Those businesses and those people do not have those kinds of resources, so what do they do? First, when a business has a complaint against its bank, it has to rely on its lender’s internal complaints procedure. Time and time again, I have been constituents deliberately hung out to dry by their banks, pushed into the long grass, in the hope that the issue would disappear or the constituents would give up. In all too many of those cases, businesses went under as a consequence of that prevarication.

Today, I want to raise the case of my constituent Mansel Beechey, a well-known publican in Aberystwyth and a customer of the Clydesdale bank, whose case regarding the mis-sale of an unregulated interest rate hedging product I have mentioned many times. We have had four or five of these debates over the past four years, and I have had to mention Mr Beechey’s case in every one, yet it remains unresolved. Mansel first formally complained to the Clydesdale bank in April 2012 through his solicitor and it took the bank six months to respond, which is clearly unacceptable. I wish to endorse the comment made by a Scottish National party Member about businesses that have been too frightened to pursue matters for fear of action being taken against them.

If an internal complaint fails—Mr Beechey had no confidence in the internal complaints mechanism—some SMEs can go to the Financial Ombudsman Service. Although the FOS is keen to explain that it will look at the facts, I am sad to say that I believe it has been
selective in what it has looked at and has all too often examined evidence in isolation. I am sure it has done well in many disputes, such as those relating to payment protection insurance and payday lending, but my experience of the past four years has shown me that it has not had the expertise to deal with acutely complex cases.

For example, the ombudsman suggested that monthly payments under the redress scheme for my constituent would have been about £1,000 more than the actual fixed rate loan interest, which Mr Beechey says he could not afford. Yet the ombudsman insists that there was not a great difference between these payments, and his whole judgment hinges on this belief, which seems extraordinary. I am not a businessman—but even I can grasp the fact that Mr Beechey’s pub business would need to take around eight times the amount of £1,000 through its till, which is about £96,000 per year or a third of the annual turnover of the pub. We need reassurance that those at the FOS are suitably qualified and experienced to understand how small businesses work.

Several constituents have cited timeliness as a problem with the FOS, which, sadly, seems to move at glacial speed. Some cases presented several years ago remain unresolved. What is very concerning is that when a final decision has eventually been reached in a case, it will never be overruled, even when that decision may be brought into question by new evidence or a change of approach in other comparable cases.

Another example to cite is the case of Mr Geraint Thomas of Bargoed farm in Llwynycrest, a Lloyds bank customer of 53 years who was mis-sold a fixed-rate loan during the banking crisis. Mr Thomas was severely let down, with little understanding shown by his relationship manager at the bank of his financial situation, putting him and his business under great pressure. This started a long-standing complaint, which has required my intervention on several occasions, including phone calls to Lloyds officials. Eventually, a revised settlement offer was given by Lloyds, which Mr Thomas was under immense pressure to accept or he would lose out on it entirely; this came with the understanding that he would still be able to take his concerns to the FOS. However, since this period, the FOS has refused point-blank to look at the case, on the basis of the settlement he agreed with Lloyds bank, despite the fact that I had previously received assurance directly from Lloyds that his acceptance of the offer would not stand in the way of his complaint being taken to the FOS. It seems to have done exactly that.

We have heard about issues relating to subject access requests, a topic touched on a moment or two ago. Andy Keats of the Serious Banking Complaints Bureau has said:

“The bank relies on concealment of your central file, committee meeting reports and minutes, internal and external valuation of your property, loan documents and bank rules, etc.”

That is hardly a system of transparency to inspire confidence in the system. In the course of working for Mansel Beechey, we have made three subject access requests to both the Clydesdale bank and the FOS. He found that in simultaneous requests to both organisations, new information kept on coming. I have seen different transcripts of telephone conversations, three different credit reports and three different sets of credit figures. Things seem to have been changed by the stroke of a pen. Again, that is not a way to inspire my constituents’ confidence, and I seriously question the level of transparency and disclosure in his case and, no doubt, in others.

I could go on at length, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am not allowed to. I apologise for the detail of some of what I have said, but it shows the practicalities of the cases we have taken on behalf of our constituents. Let me just end by making a plea for a level playing field. The system, whether we call it ad hoc or something else, seems to have been stacked firmly in favour of the banks. Our constituents—the small businesses of Ceredigion and elsewhere—deserve a fair chance. That is why I hope that some of the suggestions made by the all-party group will be taken forward, in the weeks and months—not years—ahead.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. If everyone who wishes to speak takes approximately seven minutes, everyone will get a chance. If they do not, some people might not get to speak, and that would not be fair.

1.58 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Cop): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), who not only made a very articulate case on behalf of his constituents, but exposed the vacuum at the heart of the regulatory framework to support small businesses. I appreciated everything he had to say. I also congratulate all hon. Members who secured this important and timely debate, which, as we have heard, has real resonance in the life experiences of our constituents. That is why I am very happy to support the motion, and I wish to say something on behalf of one of my constituents who has been affected by this. I also give credit to the work that the Treasury Committee and the all-party group on fair business banking have done to give this issue the prominence it deserves.

I do not rise to speak on the minutiae of financial regulation, as I am sure you will be delighted to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker. Instead, I ask the House to consider the human stories of those denied fair outcomes in their financial disputes and those who have had to accept the current lacklustre compensatory measures. This debate is about the consumer and the customer and their right to meaningful redress when things go wrong. It is right that this House takes an interest in these matters, just as it is right that the FCA was established by an Act of Parliament. This House has an obligation to monitor the regulatory environment to ensure that our constituents are adequately protected when they bank, save, borrow and spend.

My constituent, Stephen Lilley, who runs his own business knows the devastating personal and economic effect that bad financial regulation can have. He was mis-sold an interest rate hedging product, which has left his business in considerable financial difficulty. The product was sold to him deceptively by HSBC, and included a base rate swap that was put in place to protect his business from rising interest rates, but without any explanation that should rates fall—and they certainly
There is a very clear gap in the framework of protection which needs to be addressed. This amounts to a significant injustice for very many people, and it would be intolerable if that injustice was allowed to go unchallenged. There is a need, clearly, for an effective and timely dispute resolution mechanism. As the hon. Gentleman said, central to any process of delivering justice must be full disclosure. Unless a person has access to all the information, they cannot properly bring their case and achieve justice. It must be a mechanism that is there for both regulated and unregulated financial contracts. The abuse of a proper process incentivises bad behaviour. If the banks know that there is no proper mechanism in place to achieve justice, they are encouraged to behave badly and to engage in sharp practice.

At the heart of current concerns is the Global Restructuring Group, which was set up by RBS. The stated intention was to put companies into intensive care to turn them around and to restructure their debts if necessary, but many small firms accuse the bank of deliberately forcing companies into distress, as the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) said, so that RBS can strip their assets and profit from their failure. That allegation in itself is akin to theft. On top of that, there is the serious allegation that there was a misuse of public money through the Government’s enterprise finance guarantee scheme. Lawrence Tomlinson, the former adviser to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, said:

“My fundamental concern is around what businesses were told before being brought into GRG and whether this reflected the true purpose of the division. Many businesses believed that they were in GRG to be helped, when in fact it appears to have been an exercise in restructuring the bank’s balance sheet, often in conflict with the best interests of that business.”

That is really serious. When he was in front of the Treasury Committee, he referred to “unnecessarily engineering businesses into default in order to move the business from local relationship management to turnaround divisions such as GRG.”

He alleged that the purpose was to generate revenue through “fees, increased margins and devalued assets.”

That is scandalous. They are incredibly serious allegations that must be properly addressed by the Financial Conduct Authority. It seems blindingly obvious that there must be an effective process for delivering justice.

I want to touch on the human cost. We have heard about owners of small businesses who have lost everything that they have worked for. They are in exactly the same position as any private consumer who has recourse to justice, but these people do not achieve justice. Just imagine what it is like for someone who has lost everything due to the sharp practice of a bank, but who cannot achieve any justice. It destroys people. It is impossible for them to move on. It is incumbent on this House and this Government to ensure that the matter is properly addressed.

I also wish to address the wellbeing of whistleblowers. I have a constituent, who wishes to remain nameless, who was a highly successful former employee of RBS and who raised concerns repeatedly over a sustained period about improper practice within RBS. It destroyed his health. He ended up leaving on agreed terms simply to end the nightmare that he was going through, but his concerns were not diminished in any way. The whole
saga has destroyed this man’s life. He cannot move on, and he has been met by a brick wall. I have written on his behalf to RBS and, on five occasions, I have asked for meetings. I have written to Stephen Hester, Ross McEwan, Baroness Noakes and Sir Howard Davies, and on every occasion my reasonable requests for meetings have been turned down. They hide behind the compromise agreement reached with this man to say that they are not prepared to engage with him at all any further. It seems to be an arrogant and cavalier way to treat a former, highly successful employee. They have a total disregard for the impact on this man’s health.

My constituent’s conclusion is that it is not safe to blow the whistle. We should be celebrating whistleblowers; they risk everything to expose wrongdoing. They expose awful things that happen in our major financial institutions and they should be protected. I am horrified by the shameful treatment of this man.

George Kerevan: It may help the right hon. Gentleman if I tell him this: RBS has told me that the adjudicator in its new redress system, Sir William Blackburne, will have “unfettered access” to all the bank records in the cases that are brought up. The right hon. Gentleman might want to use that in his future dealings with the bank.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that suggestion. The FCA needs to take decisive action to provide justice to business owners who lost everything, establish an ongoing mechanism that is available for future cases of misconduct, and provide protection for whistleblowers destroyed by arrogant, dismissive behaviour by a bank owned by the taxpayer—that is the scandal. The need for justice is overwhelming and it is incumbent on the Government to respond properly to this call.

2.10 pm

Michelle Thomson (Edinburgh West) (Ind): I made a speech in this place on 1 February 2016 on the FCA compensation scheme for interest rate hedging products. I argued then that that scheme was ill thought out and provided no effective redress for businesses that had been made insolvent. To be honest, I was almost tempted to re-read my previous speech because here we are again, although I would have included the new numbers. Whereas in the case of the IRHP scheme 10% of its complainants were insolvent, in the case of RBS Global Restructuring Group that figure is upwards of 75%, with some estimates as high as 94%, yet fundamentally nothing has changed because RBS has already confirmed that it will not deal with the business owners who have lost their livelihood. The too little, too late apology from the chief executive of RBS, Ross McEwan, is not good enough.

Thanks to the excellent investigative journalism of BuzzFeed and the BBC, the so-called dash-for-cash articles make fascinating, yet harrowing reading. They clearly demonstrate a system that is well ordered and well structured in which the winner takes all. The so-called victory emails that were sent to teams in GRG when West Register acquired an asset are a disgrace. That is quite telling because where there is a victor, there is always a loser.

I am grateful to Nick Stoop of Warwick Risk Management who applies the story of the “Komodo dragon” condition. The Komodo dragon lies in wait at a watering hole where it nips the foot of its prey. The prey escapes, apparently not seriously harmed, but the bite is toxic and the dragon knows that its target will eventually weaken and die. So it is with RBS swaps and GRG. The swaps salesman lands the toxic bite. GRG and West Register then get to tear the client to pieces.

I concur with Members who spoke about what that means for those people. We can never forget that people are at the heart of what we are trying to do here. Remember what they may have lost—their family home, their business, their livelihood, their future livelihood if they planned for their children to go into the business, their dignity, their pride and often their very self-definition. We know that wider society loses—the wider community, other local businesses that depend on the failed business, its supply chain, creditors, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and local authorities. My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) pointed out the potential emotional impact on individuals who, for years, have to dig deep for resilience and strength, but very often end up with mental health issues or develop physical illnesses. Let us never forget that people have committed suicide as a result of the actions of some of our banks.

When did we sign up to this? When did we sign up to a taxpayer-owned bank pillaging the assets of our SMEs—the so-called life blood of our economy—or creating a system where victory emails are sent when another department of the same bank asset-strips? We have to ask whether abuses such as those at RBS could have taken place if we had a system where a business owner could simply be heard. I concur again with my hon. Friend that it is a contract between unequals when somebody who has been declared sequestrated or insolvent cannot take on a bank.

Mr Baker: In this House we often hear strident language. The hon. Lady used the word “pillage”. I entirely agree that it is wholly appropriate to describe some of that behaviour as a pillage of those companies, and I hope the Minister will bear that in mind.

Michelle Thomson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that compliment.

Finally, I want to address the topic of culture. We need to recall that it is the underlying culture of institutions that has enabled this to happen. We know that we have come from a driven, bottom-line culture, but we must make our banking system—our whole financial system—work for us and for our society. I fear that we have lost sight of that over recent years. I agree that we need a tribunal, but we also need an effective process so that precedent can be set and learned from, and so that behaviour is changed and abuses do not happen in the first place. We have seen that happen with other tribunal systems.

I thank the APPG for its support in driving this campaign and Andrew Bailey of the FCA who endorsed the idea. It is time to get started.
Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) on securing this timely debate.

A key issue that we need to address is how we end the conveyor belt of actions by financial services companies that generate disputes. Far too often, the perpetrators seem to be left to continue as before, so if we are to address the issue, we need to improve performance right across the sector. I was pleased that the debate was sparked by comments from Andrew Bailey, the new chief executive of the FCA. I sincerely hope he will follow through on the interest he has expressed in changing how we deal with these issues.

From the cases that I have encountered, it is clear that the current ad hoc approach is not working. As we have heard eloquently expressed today, why should those who blow the whistle on wrongdoing end up losing out, not just through the actions of their peers, but through the actions, or inaction, of the regulator? From my surgeries and caseload, I am well aware of concern at the actions of RBS and other lenders. Some constituents have experience of banks tilting the balance of risk too far in their own favours. I am particularly concerned to hear of banks forcing customers to use their home to underpin commercial loans in order to avoid being pushed into administration.

I want to highlight two constituency cases of concern. The first goes to the heart of the basic service provided by the banks—safeguarding our money and paying it out only when authorised to do so. A young constituent, Calum Cheshire, has had a bank account with RBS since he was 12 years old and, as a student, he worked to build up some funds. In July 2015 he was shocked when his bank statement told him that someone had withdrawn £500 from a branch in the east of Scotland on a Saturday when he was at home in the west of Scotland. To cut a long and painful experience short, Mr Cheshire has been seriously let down. RBS disregarded the FCA-defined rules for such circumstances. Not only has it effectively accused its customer of fraud, but it has rewritten his evidence to suit its narrative.

According to the bank’s defence, it appears that the usual way to commit fraud using the bank’s branch network is to walk into a branch that one has never used, produce proof of identity that does not include a bankcard, and ask to clear one’s account—a most unlikely scenario, but one that was parroted back to Mr Cheshire by the Financial Ombudsman Service as a reason for refusing to order the return of his money. Despite vast sums spent to have the FCA write a regulatory framework and the FOS to keep financial service disputes out of the courts, Mr Cheshire is now forced to resort to the small claims court to secure the redress that has been denied him to date. I issue a challenge to RBS to provide Calum Cheshire with a proper explanation of fraud and misappropriation of funds. For the benefit of us all, I would like to see a high-profile case resolved, so that the integrity of the financial services sector, and the response by the regulator then and now, might justly worry all Members of this House, and particularly the Treasury. The finding issued by the commissioner describes the FSA’s response as unco-ordinated and fragmented, and condemns it for failing to prevent continuing detriment to investors.

In the absence of answers from the FCA, those affected are turning to the Complaints Commissioner for answers. The commissioner recently released his findings regarding a complaint by George Patellis. In 2011, as the newly appointed chief executive of the company making investments on behalf of the Connaught fund, he reported to the FSA what he considered a systematic defrauding of the fund. This was an act of genuine integrity from a senior figure in the financial services sector, and the response by the regulator then and now should gravely worry all Members of this House, and particularly the Treasury. The finding issued by the commissioner describes the FSA’s response as unco-ordinated and fragmented, and condemns it for failing to prevent continuing detriment to investors.

I had the opportunity to discuss this, when I met Andrew Bailey recently. I highlighted my concern that there was a danger the FCA would be damaged by its handling of legacy cases such as Connaught, and the same may be said of the Global Restructuring Group issue. I was therefore disappointed to see the FCA’s response to the commissioner’s findings. He recommended that Mr Patellis receive a public apology. Instead, the FCA chose to issue a private letter of apology. Not surprisingly, Mr Patellis described that as “beyond disappointing”, and reiterated many of the failures of regulation by the FSA and FCA since he first blew the whistle on what he strongly believes was a process of fraud and misappropriation of funds. For the benefit of other Members, I am happy to lodge the Complaints Commissioner’s findings and the correspondence between the FCA and Mr Patellis in the Library.

The Complaints Commissioner refers to an internal assessment by the FCA that confirms the FSA delayed reporting this alleged fraud to the police for approximately
18 months. I would welcome a reassurance from Treasury Ministers that this assessment has been shared with them.

So, whether we are looking at the operation of financial services companies as payment services providers, investment managers or commercial lenders, we must expect integrity. It is not yet clear that the FCA is upholding that standard any more now than was the case under the FSA regime so comprehensively criticised by the Complaints Commissioner. That is the challenge facing Mr Bailey and his team as we head towards 2017. Our challenge here is to make sure that that integrity is delivered on.

2.22 pm

**Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) on his choice of tie and on securing this debate—we are wearing remarkably similar ties today, although I am not sure whether that says more about him or me.

This is a really important debate, and there are two aspects to it. First there is looking back at some of the truly appalling practices carried out on behalf of banks, and secondly there is the forward-looking aspect of making sure that these mistakes are never repeated. I do not believe that the solutions that have been put forward will do that adequately.

Banking is clearly a cornerstone of our economy. The central role that it plays has been built on trust—businesses trust that their bank will deal with them responsibly, but also that the Government and the financial system will protect them if that relationship, for whatever reason, breaks down. That system may work for a large conglomerate—a major employer with the ability to go toe to toe with the banks in terms of litigation, affording lawyers and so on. However, for small or medium-sized enterprises, that relationship is skewed, and they stand to lose out because they cannot meet the might of the banks.

Let me just put that into perspective. I am sure that these numbers will not come as a surprise to anyone, but small and medium-sized enterprises account for 47% of turnover and 60% of employment in the private sector. That is a huge part of our economy, and one we must all be cognisant of, and we must provide the protection it requires.

How do we go about rebuilding the trust that has been lost? We have heard that the problem stretches across the length and breadth of the country and that different banks and sectors have been affected by malpractice. Will ad hoc arrangements address the problem? I do not believe they will, because the problem is not ad hoc; in large part, it is systemic, and we do not solve systemic problems with ad hoc fixes.

There is a temptation in this place, and in all walks of life, to find the simplest solution possible. In this case, that will not cut the mustard; we need to find a proper solution, and my hon. Friend’s suggestion of a commercial financial dispute resolution platform, whether that is a tribunal or something else, is a key part of doing that.

Like other hon. Members, I have constituents who have had issues in this respect, particularly with RBS and its Global Restructuring Group. While I have been sitting in the Chamber, a constituent—I do not feel comfortable naming them, and they have asked me not to—has messaged me about this. He said that, in the dealings his lawyer has had with RBS, the bank’s lawyers have said that these things are water off a duck’s back and that a bit of bad publicity now will not change how it operates. If that is the case, it suggests that, even when we have ad hoc solutions in place, they do not solve the ad hoc problems. That adds to the compulsion on us to find that systemic solution.

**Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP):** Perhaps I could name one of my constituents, Archie Meikle, of Ashwood Homes, who has given me permission to do so. I have fought on his behalf for over six months, and we have been waiting for responses from RBS after he was forced into the GRG. Does my hon. Friend agree that the only way we can solve these problems and grow our economy is by making sure that our businesses are protected from programmes such as these, which are being pursued by the banks?

**Callum McCaig:** Unsurprisingly, I agree wholeheartedly. The importance of economic growth is tied into this. There are individual consequences to issues like these, but there are also whole-system economic problems that come from them.

Aberdeen is going through a difficult economic time as we speak, although I think we are beginning to see green shoots of recovery. However, we have not seen the problems associated with the previous financial downturn, and we may be in a beneficial situation. However, there is no systemic solution, and just because we do not have a problem now, that does not mean that there will not be problems in the future. The economic problem in Aberdeen has been particularly localised, but if it were to be repeated on a national level, the mistakes of the past could well creep back in. As the UK moves towards leaving the European Union, there is the risk of greater pressure on our financial and business systems, and the temptation may come back for banks to use the opportunity to make money on the backs of others. It is therefore incredibly pressing that we get this right.

The benefits of this proposal would be manifold. Rather than huge crises that we need to solve, we would have early intervention, and we would have parity between banks and companies, so that they could identify and solve problems early, without the need for massive recompense, as has been the case.

We have heard from many hon. Members today that it is very difficult to put a figure on the cost to business. It is even more difficult to calculate the cost to the economy of lost growth as a result of these problems. But let us come back to the human cost, which a number of Members have mentioned: the hours of grief, the hours of anguish and, in certain cases, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson) mentioned, the lives that have been lost. That is the problem, and we can do something about it: we can protect our businesses. We can ensure best practice, and above all, we can ensure that the mistakes of the past are never repeated.

2.29 pm

**Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** I shall be mercifully brief. I am afraid I have a slight throat infection, so I am forced into brevity against my better judgment.
I would like to address just one area: culture. Many outstanding speeches have gone into lots of detail on the way in which people have been crucified by the banks through the mis-selling of products that were entirely unsuitable—that were not transparent and simply existed, at the end of the day, to allow people to asset-strip perfectly good businesses in our society. I have a number of constituents who have been affected. I will not go into great detail on them because, like those of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig), they do not particularly want to be named, and I fear that if I give too many details, others might find out who they are. One of them was a victim of Clydesdale bank, then National Australia Bank, and then the utterly appalling Cerberus. They have, as he put it, stolen his assets and put him completely out of business—a family business—creating problems not just for him but for his entire family. Another businessmen said to me of the Clydesdale bank—NAB-Cerberus lot: “They have destroyed a business, and the mafia couldn’t have bettered the way in which they did it.”

A business close to the boundary of my constituency was promised in statements by Ross McEwan of RBS that proper mechanisms would put in place, and that there would be proper resolution, so that it would get back fees that were unsustainable and quite ridiculous. It then found that what RBS did not state was that it was surrounding this with such difficult conditions that this medium-sized business in central Scotland is unable to get back a penny of—would you believe?—£1.8 million in fees that RBS is imposing on it.

At the heart of this is a cultural problem of a particular sort. It is fundamentally about a complete lack of ethics in the banking sector in relation to businesses, including small businesses. Broadly speaking, there are two major ways in which one can look at ethics. The first is the so-called ontological approach—looking at the processes along the way. Were those processes properly transparent, and was the information properly provided, so that along the route, before one sees an outcome, it can be expected that banks operate ethically? Banks have demonstrably failed on those measures, so from the ontological point of view, they fail the test of operating ethically.

Of more interest to me from an ethical standpoint was the so-called consequentialist view—looking at the outcomes of the banks’ behaviour. Judged on that basis, they have demonstrably completely failed this community—small and medium-sized businesses in this country—and society as a whole. We can look at this from the point of view of medical ethics. The medical profession says that one should operate on the principle of non-maleficence; basically, one has an obligation not to inflict harm intentionally. If ever there was a case of operating to inflict harm intentionally, in order to gain from the destruction of businesses, it is the way in which many of these banks have been operating. We need to get action on this.

I support the motion, but there are two additional things that I would like to see. First, there should be imposed on the entire banking sector a proper and rigorous duty of care towards its customers. Unless we get a duty of care, the banks will continue to have an easy path towards ignoring the rights of individuals and businesses, and potentially continuing to destroy them for their own gain. Secondly, there should be far greater strengthening of support for whistleblowers in the banking community. The Government should contemplate putting in such severe penalties against financial institutions that they are deterred from blackmailing and harassing people who are doing society a favour, because, so often, it is the whistleblower who suffers, rather than the perpetrator of the crime.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): I add my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) for securing this very important debate, which has caused a number of Members to be contacted by constituents who own small businesses and have been fleeced and mis-sold the most awful and inappropriate hedging products, leading not only to economic disaster but, as many have said, mental health problems; there have also been other effects on health and wellbeing. My hon. Friend made an excellent speech, as always. He set the tone of the debate perfectly by saying that this is a time to move beyond individual cases. Clearly, we all have these cases, but he meant that we need to look beyond discussing them and see whether we can come to some form of permanent solution.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): I commend my hon. Friends for turning up in numbers. I am sure that everybody across the House has constituents deeply impacted by this, and it is disappointing, despite Christmas and all that, that the House is so poorly attended. Will my hon. Friend join me in praising the work of Richard Samuel, who back in May, when we first looked at this idea, drew the parallel that we have been discussing? Will he commend my hon. Friends for bringing forward—I hope that the Government will see this for what it is—proactive suggestions as to how we improve things? Yes, we rage against the system, but we are trying to be proactive and work with the Government to improve the world for small businesses.

Richard Arkless: I entirely agree. My hon. Friend puts his point passionately and very well. It is time for mourning to stop and for solutions to be found.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian made an incredibly important point about the link between low productivity levels in the UK and the threat and the pressure that small and medium-sized enterprises have been under, particularly since 2007-08. There is no smoke without fire. I am convinced, having listened to him, of the causal link between the problems that we are discussing and low productivity of SMEs.

I was particularly struck by my hon. Friend’s comments about arrangements between solicitors’ practices and large banks. I declare an interest of sorts, in that I was a practising solicitor who was seconded to a large financial services organisation. How it works is very peculiar. I was given to the bank for free by my firm, and the bank created a so-called value account. My salary was set into this value account, which triggered work for my firm. We can see the problem that SMEs have in trying to find highly reputable, highly skilled corporate lawyers; they are all working for firms that have these links with the banks. They do not hire these firms to do the work; they need this work. That is another manifestation of the complete inequality of arms between SMEs and large financial services organisations. My hon. Friend...
was right to say that banks’ terms and conditions—the secret terms of the contract—have evolved over the years, further exacerbating the inequality of arms.

My colleague on the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), made a very interesting point—I was grateful to him for taking my intervention—about alternative dispute resolution clauses in contracts. While I would clearly welcome ADR clauses in all these types of commercial contracts, I am slightly confused, because I have never seen them in the case of these hedging products. As to asking banks to incorporate these clauses voluntarily, it stands to reason that the commercial risk will drive whether they are included. We are talking about risky derivatives. Have we ever seen ADR clauses in hedging product contracts? If not, I have no idea how we could persuade the banks to incorporate them voluntarily, given the risk.

John Howell: The point that I was trying to make was that it is not just the commercial circumstances that will force the inclusion of ADR clauses, but the way in which we make ADR known as a group of activities that can help.

Richard Arkless: In that sense I completely agree. The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that ADR, as a concept, exists; we are asking not for a new beast to be created, but for an ADR forum to be specifically linked to the contracts and disputes under discussion. However, I am cynical about banks’ motivation in putting the clauses in particularly risky contracts.

The right hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who is also a colleague of mine on the Justice Committee, made a particularly powerful speech in which he drilled home the perverse fact that the banks under discussion are in public ownership. Essentially, public funds are being used to push businesses against the wall and asset-strip them, which has consequences. It is very hard to accept that that is being funded by our taxpayers’ money. The right hon. Gentleman made that point extremely well.

The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) touched on a stark irony when he referred to the old banking system in Scotland and the rest of the UK. I wholeheartedly agree with him that strict joint and several liability incentivised a good culture and good practice, but the pendulum has swung entirely in the other direction. I will come on to discuss the crux of the issue, which is banking culture, but he made that point well.

Hannah Bardell: On culture, a number of people dealt with my constituent over many months, and he felt that the culture being driven by the bank was not for the majority. We want to believe that most people who work in the banking sector are good people, but the culture being driven from the top of those organisations means that staff end up moving and are deeply dissatisfied at not being able to serve customers properly.

Richard Arkless: My hon. Friend will be unsurprised to hear that I completely agree with her. My experience is that, although many good people work in banks and we should not tar them all with the same brush, which we are inevitably tempted to do, banks see businesses and individuals in the retail sector as units to extract revenue from. Unless banking returns to being an ethical practice of looking after people’s interests, as opposed to extracting revenue, we cannot take the vital cultural change necessary to sort out the issue.

I was particularly struck by what my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) said: even before a contention is raised, there is a reluctance to complain. Banks feel the inequality of arms before we even get to the courts or a dispute resolution system. I think that is a consequence of the public perception of the inequality of arms, and it has produced a fear factor. Clearly, an ADR system would go a long way to reducing that fear factor among SMEs.

That point was corroborated by the vice-chair of the all-party group on fair business banking, my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr). He also made a good point about the Financial Ombudsman Service and inconsistencies in the adjudication of retail banking issues. During my time at a bank, I had many dealings with the FOS, and I assure Members that it was possible to put to it two cases with exactly the same facts and circumstances and get two completely different results.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) made an excellent and powerful speech, from which I took two points. The first was the effect on mental health and wellbeing, which is often forgotten about; we are not just talking about economic consequences. The second was whistleblowing, which was picked up by my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin). The right hon. Member for North Norfolk will be pleased to hear that we intend to table two amendments to the Criminal Finance Bill. One will seek protection for whistleblowers, and the other will ask for a banking culture review. I would be grateful if he would consider them with his colleagues and perhaps support them in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson) wowed this Chamber last week—I think that deserves a mention—and I do not think that any of us could have failed to be struck by her reference to the Komodo dragon. She attacked the underlying culture in banks and said how predatory they can be.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) produced a fear factor. Clearly, an ADR system would produce a fear factor. Surely the complaints process could look at the closed circuit television and the FOS could be more inquisitorial in assessing the case. I hope that that message will go out.

When I worked for a bank and a retail customer threatened to take a matter to the FOS, we were told very clearly that that incurred a cost to the bank. I forget the exact figure, but it was between £400 and £600. When it got to that point, a quick calculation was made, and if the case could be settled at less than £600, that was what happened and the bank was not dragged through the FOS. That just demonstrates that we are units to extract revenue from, and nothing more.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig), who was the first to say that the ADR system in itself will not fix the entire problem.
He was absolutely right to mention culture. On RBS’s approach, he was told that this was water off a duck’s back, and that is absolutely true: these are actuarial, commercial calculations. The human cost is completely negated. A calculation is made of liability and potential cost, and the bank will take whichever is lower.

That concludes my summary. If I missed out any colleagues, I apologise. I agree that it would be a good idea to ease access to justice for SMEs that have contentious issues with large banks. That would make it cheaper and easier, and it would certainly help to equalise the inequality of arms. However, whether a case is considered by the FOS, a small claims court, a fast-track court, the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeal or an ADR, it is the same case, with the same contract and the same terms and conditions, that will be considered from court to court, and if all those dispute resolution vehicles do their job, they ought to come to the same conclusion. Although that would be a welcome step, we need to go beyond that and look at the reasons the organisations were sold the products in the first place. That points to the culture perpetuated by the banks. If we can fix the culture and the over-aggressive mis-selling of products that businesses and retail customers simply do not understand, we will not end up in a situation where we need an ADR. Although I welcome the proposal, we need to change the culture in order to make a real difference.

2.47 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) has summarised most of the things that I would have referred to. I thank the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) for bringing the issue before us. I also want to touch on one or two points made by the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) about the Austrian school. As he said, the system is not adequate to deal with the task of resolving complaints. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) gave a passionate exposition of his constituents’ concerns.

I am pleased that we are debating this issue. It has been the subject of cross-party engagement, particularly in the work of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and that on alternative dispute resolution, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). I suspect that RBS’s use of global restructuring is the most glaring example of how poor corporate governance and weak regulation can produce dreadful outcomes for individuals and businesses. Many of the small business owners affected have lost not just their businesses but their health. Under the current financial regulatory system there is a huge imbalance of power between small businesses and their financial services providers, as many Members have mentioned, and that imbalance needs to be redressed. When problems arise between businesses and their banks, as happened with RBS and the GRG, the dispute resolution options open to businesses are inadequate. RBS announced in November that it was establishing a new complaints review, but any ad hoc dispute resolution mechanism based on the internal mechanisms of the bank is clearly insufficient.

The failures of RBS were fundamental. Its actions were not just the result of a few rogue employees; apparently, those actions were RBS’s explicit policy. Employees were strongly encouraged to push small businesses into the GRG. Restructuring was required of companies, along with interest rate uplifts. Many claim that once small businesses were in the hands of the GRG, they were, to use a phrase, turned over for every penny that could be found. There was no great secret in the bank about what was taking place. Ostensibly, the fact that project “dash for cash” was in the system was celebrated, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson) said. The intention could not have been more obvious, and it had little to do with assisting businesses that were in trouble.

The motion usefully highlights the fact that we cannot say that this was a problem at just one bank. The issue went beyond that; it was systemic, and we can point to the wider failings of the banking sector that led us here. The catastrophic failure of the system in 2008 made that clear. Poor regulations, excessive borrowing and incentives within banks all helped to drive the crash. Of course, the cost to the taxpayer was immense. On the IMF estimate, the UK bail-out scheme cost, at its peak, £1.2 trillion.

The lessons that should have been learned are clear. Banks have to be regulated well in the public interest and in the interests of the taxpayer. A laissez-faire approach is inappropriate for a sector of the economy as uniquely privileged as banking. Since 2008, British banks have placed themselves on a more solid foundation, building up reserves and conducting regular stress tests, and closer monitoring has been adopted by the appropriate authorities. That is quite right.

RBS’s novel approach to many small businesses shows graphically and in a historic way how things can go wrong. Poor management, avarice and hubris took the place of prudent management at the top of the bank, and other people’s money was used imprudently on the basis of hubris. The management were reduced to shoring up the balance sheet by almost any means necessary, and mechanisms must be in place to stop that happening.

Since the financial crisis, a consensus has grown up that a failure of regulation and regulators helped to drive the crash. Efforts have been made at a national and international level, but there have been troubling signs since the election last year that the Government may be going a bit cold on the necessary work. The proposals of the Vickers commission have been, as John Vickers has said, largely ignored, and the inquiry into banking culture has been scrapped.

I know that the Minister is in listening mode, and I hope that he listens today. There are challenges ahead, and we must have mechanisms in place to deal with them. To leave small businesses without even the protections available to consumers is to leave them very vulnerable, and we all know what happens to small businesses when they are left in such a vulnerable position. I do not want to harp on about banking failure, but nor should we go into amnesiac mode to save a few blushes. It is absolutely vital that we get the proper processes and mechanisms in place.

When there are disputes, it is essential that they can be resolved speedily and effectively. Ad hoc dispute mechanisms go only so far, so we need systematic arrangements. In previous cases, small businessmen have had to rely on expensive and inaccessible court procedures to obtain redress, and that is not appropriate. It is not enough, as the motion states, to establish ad hoc compensation schemes after the event. They lack the
authority to secure public confidence, so we have to go further. It is much better to have the appropriate procedures in place before the event, and before things begin to go wrong. The motion rightly insists that the Government follow the advice of the Treasury Committee and establish an effective dispute mechanism for financial services.

I will bring my comments to a conclusion. It is essential that the malpractice in RBS is not allowed to recur. As has been said, the taxpayer still owns a huge share—73%—in the bank. The Office for Budget Responsibility now believes, on Treasury advice, I understand, that the stake may never be sold, or will not be sold for a considerable period. It is absolutely right that we should expect any bank to treat its customers fairly. The failures at RBS and its treatment of its customers would be totally unacceptable at any institution. At the moment, there is a wider case for at least considering the establishment of effective regulatory mechanisms, and not only such mechanisms, to change the governance and structure of our banking system. It is now pretty clear that RBS will not be sold for the foreseeable future, so it is perhaps time to conduct a full review of all the options for the future of RBS, including whether any alternatives would deliver better value for money for business and the economy. The key is to have a robust, independent and systematic resolution platform.

2.55 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): I thank the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) for securing this debate and, to be fair, for his very thoughtful and measured speech. We certainly acknowledge the importance of the issues that have been raised today.

As a former businessman, I have a great deal of sympathy with all the businesses that have been mentioned and, indeed, all the other businesses that have been treated unfairly. As has been clearly shown by the speeches today, we all care about the businesses that form the backbone of our economy. We should never forget that businesses are more than just numbers; they are people, families, employees, customers and local communities.

This Government have a very strong record of supporting large and small companies, including through our competitive tax regime and our investment in skills, research and infrastructure. Clearly, one way that businesses are able to grow and develop is through having access to finance, so we all want financial services providers to lend to our businesses and to act in the strictest accordance with the FCA’s rules. Wherever that is not the case, any affected business should be compensated appropriately.

We have already heard about the avenues that exist for SMEs in dealing with their banks—from the Financial Ombudsman Service to the FCA’s powers to require firms to establish redress schemes—but it is right to look at the interactions of small businesses with financial services providers to ensure that their dealings are fair and effective. The FCA is already doing that. It launched a discussion paper on SMEs as users of financial services in November 2015. Among other things, that looks at the remit of the FOS in providing fast and inexpensive redress for consumers and our smallest businesses. The FCA is currently analysing the responses to the discussion paper, but when its findings are published, we will consider them very closely. Let me make it clear that if they include the need to review the support for businesses in resolving financial disputes, we will look at that.

It is important for me to reflect on the specific comments made today. There have been quite a few, but I shall do my very best to cover most of them. The hon. Member for East Lothian asked about reforming insolvency law. He may be pleased to hear that the Government keep insolvency law under regular review, and we are currently considering the responses to our recent review of the corporate insolvency framework.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Andrew Bailey. As Andrew Bailey made clear in his letter to the hon. Gentleman yesterday, the FCA is considering the treatment of small and medium-sized enterprises as users of financial services. It has yet to publish the findings from that work, but, again, if they include the need to review the support for businesses in resolving financial disputes, we will look at that.

I fully recognise the hon. Gentleman’s views about RBS, the Global Restructuring Group and its treatment of small business. I share those concerns and am keen to discuss with RBS the detail of the redress scheme it announced recently for former customers of GRG.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) for his support for alternative dispute resolution. We welcome businesses using alternative methods to resolve disputes.

The right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) raised concerns about the quality of the IRHP review. The Treasury Committee has recommended that the FCA should learn lessons and the FCA has confirmed that it will do so once legal proceedings are at an end. He also mentioned access to the Financial Ombudsman Service. The FCA estimates that 97% of small businesses have access to the FOS and the Government believe the FOS plays a crucial role for small businesses.

The right hon. Gentleman asked an important question about the British Business Bank’s enterprise finance guarantee scheme. At the instigation of the British Business Bank, RBS conducted an in-depth internal investigation of its administration of the EFG. RBS put in place a plan to rectify the issues identified and has concluded remediation action with affected customers.

Mr Hanson: Will the Minister give way?

Simon Kirby: I will not give way, but perhaps we might speak afterwards. I have an awful lot of things I have to address.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) asked about incentives to discourage misconduct. The Government and regulators have acted to embed personal responsibility in banking through the senior managers and certification regime. He also stated that small businesses should be treated as consumers.

Mr Baker: I am not sure that I did state that. I asked the Government to consider whether it would be appropriate, if I recall correctly.

Simon Kirby: I thank my hon. Friend for that clarification, and I apologise to the right hon. Member for Delyn for being inconsistent.
Unincorporated sole traders and small partnerships fall under the regulatory rules of the consumer credit regime. The FCA is asking how all SMEs are treated as customers of financial services, as is right and proper.

The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) mentioned the IRHP scheme. The redress scheme was not designed to replicate the courts system, which can be lengthy and expensive, as Members have acknowledged. Independent reviewers were put in place to oversee each case.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) asked about the timeliness of the ombudsman’s decisions. I agree that the decisions should be quick. I am assured that its decisions are faster than the courts and free for complainants. However, inevitably, complex cases will take time to resolve. He also asked about the disclosure of information. Where the ombudsman considers it appropriate to accept confidential information, an edited version, summary or description will be disclosed to the other party. I agree that it is right to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) for keeping this issue on the agenda.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) asked an important question about whistleblowers. I understand that the FCA has invited the hon. Member for East Lothian to discuss whistleblowing and I am sure he would be welcome at that meeting. To be clear, the Government recognise the information and huge value that whistleblowers provide.

Norman Lamb: Will the Minister give way?

Simon Kirby: I will not give way; I am so sorry.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned RBS and GRG. The Government recognise the seriousness of the allegations against RBS. The FCA has stated that it is carefully considering the skill persons report and other material and it is currently assessing what further work may be needed given the report’s findings.

The hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) mentioned a constituent, and I have a great deal of sympathy with the situation in which he finds himself. The Government are committed to supporting small businesses through the tax system and through a regulatory regime that balances consumer protection and growth.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson) asked about GRG and the Government-owned bank. I should make it clear that Her Majesty’s Government’s shareholding is managed at arm’s length from the Government on a commercial basis and that HMG did not know about GRG’s activities. As a shareholder, HMG is not informed of internal business decisions. That is an important point.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) asked about Connaught. I recognise the difficult position of many Connaught investors and I hope that the FCA considers any lessons to be learned from that case. I understand that an investigation into the collapse of the fund is ongoing.

The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) mentioned duty of care. I agree that the outcome is important and that culture is vital. The FCA has principles of business, including acting fairly, on which it can take action. The consumer panel has asked the FCA to look at a duty of care and I am happy to tell hon. Members that I will write to the FCA to ask for an update on its thinking and put the letter and the reply in the Library.

I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate. I will summarise the Government’s position briefly because although we certainly do note many of the issues that are raised in the motion and by hon. Members in the debate, we have also heard that there are existing avenues open to businesses that are seeking to resolve financial disputes. In the case of the smallest businesses, there is the Financial Ombudsman Service. When there are widespread issues, the FCA has the power to take specific measures to ensure redress and, of course, the usual legal process is open to businesses.

However, the FCA has work ongoing to look at the relationship between SMEs and financial services providers, and we look forward to the next steps in that work. I assure hon. Members that we will then consider the need for future steps in that context.

3.7 pm

George Kerevan: I thank all Members who took part in the debate. It has been very good and I think that we have progressed matters. I will take the Minister’s reply as saying that the door is still open. We will certainly want to come through it.

I particularly thank Heather Buchanan and Fiona Sherriff, who are the brains and hard work behind the all-party group, and deserve to have their names on the record.

The next stage is to have an inquiry, which will be conducted jointly by the APPGs on fair business banking and on alternative dispute resolution, in conjunction with the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators and with the support of the Federation of Small Businesses. I hope that the Minister, if he nods his head violently enough, will give evidence at that inquiry.

Simon Kirby: I would be delighted.

George Kerevan: Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes the statement presented to the Treasury Committee on 20 July 2016 by Dr Andrew Bailey of the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA); endorses his statement that the ad hoc creation of a compensation scheme within the FCA was not entirely successful and lacked perceived authority to treat customers with fair outcomes; believes that the recent headlines and allegations in the press against RBS will lead to pressure for a similar scheme; notes that many debates in this House over the years have focused on similar subjects with different lenders; believes that what is needed is not ad hoc compensation schemes, but a long-term, effective and timely dispute resolution mechanism for both regulated and unregulated financial contracts; and calls on the FCA, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Ministry of Justice to work with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Fair Business Banking to create a sustainable platform for commercial financial dispute resolution.
Broadband Universal Service Obligation

[Relevant document: Second Report from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Establishing world-class connectivity throughout the UK, HC 147.]

3.9 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the Broadband Universal Service Obligation.

Today is not the first time that the House has discussed broadband and I suspect it will not be the last. All Members know from their postbags that their constituents have imperfect connections to the internet that is changing all their lives.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Not true!

Matt Warman: I suspect that those Members who think that they do not have constituents with imperfect connections represent constituencies where the connection is so bad that their constituents do not have the opportunity to tell them.

A universal service obligation is a huge step forward for those constituents in areas—largely, but by no means wholly, urban areas—where superfast and ultrafast speeds are possible: shopping is cheaper, the Government are more accessible, culture is on tap and the NHS can be more efficient. But for those in areas where the current USO of 10 megabits per second is a distant dream, the USO could be a lifeline from this Government, who would help those people to play a full part in the modern world, from drone deliveries to driverless cars.

There is a risk, however—this is why I am so grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate—that that lifeline is not as perfect as it could be. I hope that the debate will send a message from the House that “universal” in USO should mean that it is genuinely available to all, whether businesses or consumers, even if that has to be through a satellite connection or preferably, in due course, a 5G connection; that “service” should mean that the connection keeps pace with the quickening web requirements of the modern era, for upload and latency as well as for download; and that “obligation” should mean that it is provided by 2020 with a road map for each individual premises and a penalty on the provider if it has failed to deliver on time.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He mentioned 5G. I happened to find myself in a remote west Oxfordshire village recently, where I found 4G available at 62 megabits per second, 50% faster than my BT Infinity at home. Does he agree that it would be appropriate to have 4G everywhere, not least everywhere in the seat of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts)?

Matt Warman: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend highlights the patchiness of the network. My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) could not be more deserving of that excellent speed, but all of us in this House are equally deserving of such speeds. That is the point of the debate. None of the conditions I just outlined would be controversial in any other regulated industry.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I ought to point out that although I am very glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) got very good 4G reception in west Oxfordshire, we suffer from patchy and, in some cases, non-existent hard broadband coverage. In areas from Standlake in the south to Ledwell and the Worton in the north, there is very much a need. I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) agrees that we should be rolling out good broadband throughout not just west Oxfordshire but the whole country.

Matt Warman: I absolutely agree. There are calls from across the House for exactly that. I would add that for me, it does not matter whether the USO is delivered through a fibre broadband connection, or 4G, 5G or whatever. The point, at the end of the day, is the connectivity that the constituent receives.

Mr Vaizey: I hope I can help my hon. Friends. I understand the House’s important focus on the worries and concerns of minorities, but perhaps I can help with the tone of the debate. Before concentrating on the woes of those minorities, should not my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) acknowledge the incredible success of the rural broadband roll-out programme, which by the end of 2017 will hit its target of bringing superfast broadband access to 95% of the country? It is probably the most successful infrastructure programme any Government have run in many years.

Matt Warman: I gather it is not correct to invite interventions, but the name of the Minister who was responsible for that programme temporarily escapes me. My right hon. Friend is completely right that this infrastructure project has been delivered with what is, in some senses, a genuinely world-leading speed and to a world-leading extent. We should not forget that, but it is small comfort to the people who do not yet have the connection. No infrastructure project that the Government are involved in is more important than broadband. The speed of delivery in some places has been world leading, but in others it has fallen far short of the standards that our constituents often tell us they expect.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I totally take on board the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), but the success of the programme has spawned its own issues. In Horsham, we have areas with good broadband. However, kids who live in surrounding villages cannot access the internet and the school curriculum is based around using it. That produces very significant problems for those children.

Matt Warman: My hon. Friend underlines the ubiquitous importance of broadband in whatever area of life we talk about. We have to ensure that it is available not only to homes and businesses, but to schools and the health service. The announcement, that from 2020 everywhere will get 10 megabits, is one of the most welcome the Government have made. It will, however, be met with somewhat hollow laughter from those
constituents who have nothing, and, shall we say, sceptical excitement from those who have 1 megabit, 2 megabits or 3 megabits, and think that 10 megabits might allow them to use the iPlayer or whatever else constituents in urban areas regard as absolutely standard.

Mr Baker: I would just like to take this opportunity to invite my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) to come and visit Wycombe. He is very welcome to address my constituents in Hambleden Valley, particularly in Fawley and Turville, where they would be extremely grateful if they had 4G, never mind fixed broadband.

Matt Warman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Mr Vaizey: May I, via my hon. Friend, accept that invitation? I will go to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) to talk about the success of broadband and the perils of Brexit.

Matt Warman: I am delighted to pass on that message.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Matt Warman: Oh, for heaven’s sake! Yes.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Does he agree that a number of innovative firms, such as ITS in my constituency, are rolling out wireless technology that allows some communities to band together and fill the gaps that the current programme, unfortunately, has not reached?

Matt Warman: I agree, and I will come on to that in a moment. The USO must enable those innovative solutions, otherwise it will not fulfil exactly the ambitions I know my right hon. Friend the Minister has for it.

In my constituency, despite having the least well-funded police force, an enormous rural road network, and very strong opinions on the EU and immigration, broadband is the single biggest issue in my postbag. My local superfast connection figures are still 6% below the national average, and for the neighbouring constituency of Louh and Horncastle they are 13% below the national average. All Lincolnshire’s MPs know from their respective constituents the importance of this issue, even though our county council has delivered its projects ahead of schedule and under budget. I think all Members agree about in a recent debate. It is certainly important that we explore the avenue of allowing communities to club together rather than leaving individuals to fend for themselves.

Connecting the final few per cent. of the UK will require an unprecedented host of diverse solutions, from satellite broadband to, I hope, full fibre. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) mentioned, in order to encourage private companies such as those she mentioned to take innovative paths. This effectively would create a voucher scheme of the sort that the Minister talked about in a recent debate. It is certainly important that we explore the avenue of allowing communities to club together rather than leaving individuals to fend for themselves.

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend mentions the one big family, BT. In my constituency, there are excellent companies, such as STL Communications, which provides data, IT and broadband solutions across the entirety of west Oxfordshire and London. Does he agree that there might be ways in which all sorts of companies can be involved in the provision of a 100% broadband solution?

Matt Warman: Yes.

The Government’s indication that, in the hardest-to-reach areas, connections will be provided on request, rather than by default, is a pragmatic economic response, but communities should be incentivised to go further.
I would, however, caveat this approach—that it be demand led—by saying that the USO should surely be extended to all major roads, not just motorways, and to railway lines and stations as soon as possible. I know that the Department for Transport is working on this, but building it into the USO as well would be progress.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): Over the many months I spent on the HS2 Committee, I tried very hard to insist that we included an obligation to provide broadband all the way up the line and that we gave affected communities access to it. I also think that for every development of over 20 houses we should insist that the developer put in superfast broadband. What does my hon. Friend think about that?

**Matt Warman:** I absolutely agree with both points. It is daft that we are not fibbing up every new housing development by default, and it is short-sighted of developers, because we know that superfast broadband connections add value to the houses. There is virtue on both sides.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), I would go slightly further than Lord Adonis’s National Infrastructure Commission did recently, and say that we should be slightly more creative in identifying areas of default provision.

Crucial to all this is the issue of data. There would be a real risk of cherry-picking if we were to publish simply a bulk set of every single connection and how fast it is; actually, that might provoke the sort of anti-competitive behaviour that none of us would like to see. However, it strikes me that publication of address-level data will provide constituents with an accurate picture of their broadband speeds now, and it should also provide them with a road map for the future, so that it would allow not only prospective purchasers of a house to see what speed they might get and what their upgrade path might be, but communities to pool their own data so that they can identify whether they should be going out to other companies to try to attract investment or whether they might be able to wait a little while because they know that a solution is coming.

**Antoinette Sandbach:** Does my hon. Friend agree that Actual Experience provides free software that can be downloaded on to people’s computers at home that feeds into Ofcom and provides real-time data? I am trying to encourage communities in my constituency that do not have access to 2 megabits per second broadband to use that free software so that we can gain greater and more effective data on this issue.

**Matt Warman:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Actual Experience, which has worked with Ofcom, provides an invaluable and often free service from which all our constituents could benefit. It is precisely that data that allows communities to join themselves together and work out whether they can go to companies and point out that they are an attractive place to invest, or indeed whether they need to persuade, as has happened in many parts of the country, a friendly farmer to help them dig the trench. It is a useful thing.

**Patricia Gibson:** The hon. Gentleman is generous in giving way. Does he agree with me that the heart of this issue is not that Ofcom does not know where the gaps are; it is that provision in rural areas is challenging? It is a challenge that companies do not find conducive to taking up and we have social exclusion as a consequence?

**Matt Warman:** I agree that communities that are not connected are not connected to the modern world. That is precisely why we need to make sure that a USO is genuinely universal. I do not agree with the idea that data will not help those communities. I think the more data we have, the more we are able to go to prospectively innovative companies and ask them what they can do, and the more we can see how those communities can get together. It is a two-way street.

In the end, it will be communities themselves, I believe, that drive the universal service obligation. As BT and others have pushed the roll-out of existing broadband further and faster than originally predicted, the howls of protest from those who are left behind have grown only louder. Without the USO, Britain’s digital divide will become too wide to bridge. With it done properly, however, it will be the foundation for a truly digital nation. Enabling that is enabling a new industrial revolution, which is a prize that I think we would all agree—whatever our party—is more than worth fighting for. I hope that this debate will enable the Minister and others in the industry to gain a wider perspective of the views of this House, so that we can build the best possible universal service obligation for all of our constituents. I commend the motion to the House.

3.28 pm

**Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): Let me first congratulate the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing this debate. I truly welcome the opportunity to discuss this crucial subject. I particularly welcome the conversion of the Conservative party, after a very long time—seven or so years—to supporting a policy of universal broadband provision.

Access to broadband is absolutely crucial in society today, and has been for the last seven years. That is true not just for businesses, but for individuals. The Government are increasingly insisting that citizens access services through the medium of broadband. It is therefore essential that we have a universal service. It is extraordinary that that concept, which the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness talked about for the last 20 minutes, was rejected by the Conservative party. The concept of universality is crucial, but it was rejected by the coalition Government in 2010. In the 2010 general election, the Labour party had a policy of introducing universal broadband at a speed of 2 megabits by 2012. When the coalition Government came to power, they instead insisted—I remember the hon. Member for Wantage—

**Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Right honourable.

**Ian C. Lucas:** The right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaziey); I beg his pardon. I remember the wording, as I heard it so many times: the coalition Government were going to deliver the best superfast broadband in Europe by 2015. But they rejected universal broadband, and ever since, I have, when sitting on these Benches, watched Conservative MPs complaining about lack of broadband provision. They are complaining because, as we all know from our constituents—individuals and companies—that provision is not being delivered. The
result has been disastrous, especially for communities away from south-east England and the richest parts of the UK.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman’s points on universality. Llwyn Helyg country house is an award-winning business in my constituency; it has won a range of accolades and has a five-star rating on TripAdvisor. The only negative comment it has ever had is about bad broadband provision, and that has an impact on its business.

Ian C. Lucas: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. The same point has been made to me, and I am sure to many other Members, particularly those representing beautiful constituencies with large tourism sectors. Broadband provision is extremely important for businesses in that sector nowadays; to appeal to and access a worldwide market, they have to be able to provide these services.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. As he will know, Wales, including my Neath constituency, has some of the most rural communities in the UK, and despite the Superfast Cymru project we still lag behind England on coverage and take-up. Does he agree that the Government should underwrite the additional £20 million needed, and currently being sought from EU funds, to get the job done?

Ian C. Lucas: It is essential that we put the infrastructure in place that will deliver for the whole of the United Kingdom; that is the thrust of my speech.

I represent Wrexham. We have heard about rural areas that do not have access to broadband, but Wrexham is a manufacturing and exporting constituency that has many businesses and many modern technology parks around it. Many of those businesses have been telling me over the past few years that they have not been able to access the type of broadband services that are essential for modern businesses to be able to compete.

Antoinette Sandbach: The Superfast Cymru project is led and delivered by the Labour-run Welsh Government in Cardiff, so if those businesses are struggling, I suggest that the hon. Gentleman speaks to the Welsh Government in Cardiff, who are rolling out that programme.

Ian C. Lucas: It is a matter of regret that the hon. Lady never misses an opportunity to be partisan. If she knew anything about this subject, she would know that the infrastructure and the whole basis on which broadband services are delivered are constructed by the UK Government; it has been their responsibility to deliver the policy of spreading broadband across the UK. It demeaned the Conservative party to resort to petty, political point scoring, but that is what I have come to expect from her.

This is a serious, important subject, because I believe in the United Kingdom and in supporting areas right across the country—not just the richest areas, which is the policy of the Conservatives; whenever figures come through from Ofcom, we still see that the richest parts of the country have the greatest broadband provision. That acts against the interests of the nations and regions of the UK. It is the role of government, and the UK Government in particular, to correct the deficiencies of the market, but the coalition and Conservative Governments have failed to do that since 2010. That is why we have heard so many complaints from Conservative MPs at every Culture, Media and Sport Question Time since 2010 about the weakness of broadband provision and services.

I accept that there has been progress. Demand has not stood still since 2010. I know that the hon. Member for Wantage—

Mr Vaizey: Right honourable.

Albert Owen: He was rewarded for failure.

Ian C. Lucas: Right honourable. It is always good have personal connections in politics these days; one always secures rewards.

Labour’s commitment to 2 megabits would have established universal provision, so that the entire UK would benefit from the expansion of broadband services. In reality, the richest areas have benefited most. We always accepted that 2 megabits was a starting point and would not be enough, but the important thing was the commitment to a universal service. Jettisoning that principle was disastrous. It reflected a failure to appreciate the essential nature of broadband in today’s economy and society. It accelerated still further the regional imbalances in the UK; this country has the most marked regional differences in income of all OECD countries. If we are to address economic and wealth inequality across the UK, the Government must act to ensure that we have a universal superfast broadband service. I welcome, therefore, the conversion to a commitment to universal service, but it is a shame that that did not happen in 2010, and that it has not been in place for the past six years.

BT has achieved much in broadband provision, and has extended that provision since 2010. However, it effectively has a monopoly over the infrastructure in many areas, yet it is not able to meet the required demand.

Antoinette Sandbach: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian C. Lucas: I will not give way. There are delays in consumer provision reminiscent of the pre-privatisation era of the early 1980s. Individuals tell me time and again that they wait weeks, sometimes months, for a broadband connection when they move house.

Antoinette Sandbach: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Ian C. Lucas: I will not give way to the hon. Lady because she makes cheap political points.

In addition, many areas do not have the broadband infrastructure to secure superfast services. Until recently, Wrexham had only one broadband infrastructure system, which was unable to meet the demand from local businesses and individuals. The UK Government, who are responsible for devising the system, should have put in place a governance structure that created either the necessary infrastructure through a monopoly provider or a...
competitive market in which providers compete to build infrastructure. Their failure is that they have done neither since 2010.

I am pleased to say that in Wrexham, in the past two months, Virgin Media has begun to build its own infrastructure system, its first in north Wales, as part of the Project Lightning programme. I thank Virgin Media for responding to the pressure I have consistently put it under to introduce that system, but if we are to have a universal system right across the UK, it is incumbent on the Government and regulators to create the system necessary right across the UK. That they have not done so already is a failure on their part.

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock) rose—

Ian C. Lucas: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Matt Hancock: Right hon. Gentleman. I wanted to improve the quality of debate by bringing a couple of facts to bear, because the hon. Gentleman is making a highly politicised and partisan speech. It is just worth pointing out to the House that in Wrexham, a town I know well, 95% of premises have access to superfast broadband, and by next summer that figure will be 98%.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If everybody is to get equal time, Members should take up to 10 minutes; if they do not do that, other people will get squeezed out. If Members wish to make interventions, they should be short and sweet. I ask the people who are giving way to use up to 10 minutes. Ian Lucas, I know you are nearly ending your speech.

Ian C. Lucas: I am very aware of the position in Wrexham, because people contact me every week—every day, on occasion—to complain about a lack of provision. That includes complaints from businesses, and I can and will send the right hon. Gentleman a list of the complaints that I receive. I accept the position, but this is an important matter and I am not inventing these cases; they are cases that come to me.

BT is coming under a lot of pressure, and I have fought hard to get Virgin Media to come to Wrexham to provide competition to BT, which will improve the system. I do not think BT should be excluded in the future. As for the idea of a quick fix, splitting Openreach from BT is not a simple solution. One problem of the broadband market has been that a lot of the companies in the sector have spent far too much time arguing with each other about provision over the past few years. I want to make a constructive proposal for the sector, one based on my experience as a Minister. Regrettably, I am not right hon. because I do not have the right connections at present, but I was a Minister in the Labour Government who created the Automotive Council and, subsequently, the Defence Growth Partnership and the Aerospace Growth Partnership. They were put together to get businesses to work together for the benefit of the UK as a whole, to devise an effective system of businesses in individual sectors working together. I would like to see that in the broadband sector. I would like the Government, in pursuit of a universal service obligation, to construct a communications council, so that businesses work with each other and with Ofcom to devise a proper and appropriate approach to pursuing a universal obligation.

Providing broadband is not only a massive challenge for us, but a massive opportunity; the scale of the job is such that it provides training and skills potential for years to come. This should be a central task for the communications industry, and the Government should be working to ensure that the investment in infrastructure in the years to come leads to a parallel upskilling of our workforce right across the UK. A communications council should be tasked with that, and should take that objective forward.

Universal broadband should have been put in place years ago, and I welcome the fact that the Government have finally concluded that it should be introduced. They need to work with industry to look at the best way forward, and with Ofcom to secure the way forward, and then make sure that the investment made is used to upskill our young people and provide the type of service right across the UK that all businesses need in today’s world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. May I remind Members to take up to 10 minutes and no more, so that everybody can have equal time? I call Ed Vaizey.

3.44 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. I shall make two or three recommendations, which will I hope be useful to my right hon. Friend the Minister. I do not particularly want to dwell on the past, but after the previous speech it is probably worth putting in context some of the points that have been made. It is worth pointing out, for example, that, in terms of the Labour party’s promise to deliver 2 megabits by 2012, we do not know whether that would have been fulfilled, as it was based on a highly questionable telephone tax, which would have seen a revolt from consumers. In any event, we now have coverage of 99.22% at 2 megabits.

The hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) failed to explain what happened in 2010, which was that the new Government looked at the promise of 2 megabits and understood that it would not be nearly enough. In fact, I suspect that many of our constituencies, which were already getting 2 megabits, complained to us about poor broadband. What they want is a superfast connection of around 24 megabits that allows them to use many of the applications that we now regard as very commonplace.

Antoinette Sandbach: While we are talking about accuracy, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is inaccurate to say that the less economically wealthy areas have been disadvantaged, when the constituency of the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) has 95% superfast coverage while mine has just 78%?!

Mr Vaizey: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. The rural superfast broadband programme has been a great success. It has delivered access to superfast broadband to almost 5 million homes. The money invested by Government will be paid back because of the nature of
the contracts. The hon. Member for Wrexham mentioned that he had persuaded Virgin to come to his constituency. Virgin is now investing £3 billion in extending its network, and that is partly inspired by the success of the superfast broadband network.

The point I really want to make is that I am sick and tired of people talking down this country and pretending that we are in some kind of digital desert. The latest culprit—I am astonished that the Government allowed this to happen—is Lord Adonis, a Labour peer—[Interruption.] No longer a Labour peer. Alright, he is an ex-Labour peer, but we know where his sentiments lie. He used the platform of the National Infrastructure Commission to publish a report yesterday claiming that we have worse mobile broadband than Peru. He based that on one set of analysis by Open Signal. I am not denigrating that company, but it relies on people downloading an app and then uploading the speed they are getting. Some 4,500 in Peru use the Open Signal app, and most respectable telecoms analysts would not go near a country unless they had data from at least 25,000 users. One of the mobile companies in Peru does not even provide 4G, but that is not even mentioned in the Open Signal app.

It is much better to look at a company such as Akamai, which points out that we have the fastest download speed in 4G of any country in Europe. It is almost double the next best in the EU five. Its report, which was published this week, says: “the United Kingdom once again had the fastest average mobile connection speed at 23.7 Mbps (up from 23.1 Mbps in the second quarter)”.

We have between 82% and 93% household coverage for 4G. A total of 76% of mobile subscribers in this country have 4G subscriptions. That is double the next best country, which is Germany, at around 35%. We have companies such as Amazon investing in cloud services. We lead the world in e-commerce. If we are in this so-called “digital desert”, as Lord Adonis claimed today to promote his report, how come we lead on all these metrics? I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to give Lord Adonis a dressing down, and to tell him to check his facts and use a better analysis instead of running around promoting his report, pretending that we somehow live in a digital desert.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: As it happens, I have the Akamai table here on my machine. Whereas the UK has a score of 13 for international connections, Peru has a score of only 4.4. How Lord Adonis can come up with his figures, I do not know.

Mr Vaizey: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend. Apart from the dressing down of Lord Adonis at the Bar of the House of Commons, my main policy point is this—[Interruption.] I tried as a Minister to get a comprehensive data analysis of broadband connections, because too many independent reports are knocking about that people can use to make their own partisan points. We need Ofcom to collate these reports and to update its data, because its own data—not through its own fault but because of how long it takes to collect them—are often six months to a year out of date. We need one comprehensive UK digital report published every year by Ofcom, incorporating all the independent research.

I took refuge in the absolutely excellent independent analysis undertaken by thinkbroadband. If any hon. Members want to know how many connections they have in their constituency, they should go to the thinkbroadband website where they will get the most up-to-date and accurate information.

Having attacked Lord Adonis without his having the chance to defend himself, let me say that I thought his report was excellent, despite his pathetic attempt to promote it by putting out misleading analysis of the digital position in this country. The recommendations were spot-on, not least the recommendation that my right hon. Friend the Minister’s empire should be expanded. I tried to expand my empire when I was a Minister and I failed dismally. People will not be surprised to hear that, but my right hon. Friend is 10 times more talented and 10 times more superfast, and it is right that under his stewardship we should bring together all digital projects.

It is a scandal that we do not have broadband in trains. The reason is that that area is run by the Department for Transport and Network Rail, whereas it should be run by my right hon. Friend. Friend. It is a scandal that the Home Office is in charge of the emergency services network; it should be run by him. It is a scandal that we do not have coverage on our roads; it should be run by him. All these digital projects should be brought under one Minister, and I cannot think of anyone more talented than my right hon. Friend.

I come now to the third recommendation. We have something called Broadband Delivery UK—BDUK. The clue is in the title: the D is for delivery. Under my right hon. Friend the Minister, who is talented enough to oversee a large organisation such as that, Broadband Delivery UK should be turned into a delivery organisation that works with local councils. It should not be left to the hon. Member for Wrexham to browbeat Virgin Media to deliver broadband to his constituency; BDUK should be working with Virgin, Openreach and all the mobile operators.

Many of the problems that make us gnash our teeth and pull our hair out are down to appalling planning procedures. We all know the story of how Kensington and Chelsea would not allow BT to upgrade its network because it did not like the design of the green boxes. I have had rows with council leaders in south London who just did not like the people at Openreach and so were not prepared to move. I had telecoms companies coming to me saying that they wanted to deliver broadband to council houses but could get a wayleave from the council to do it. So much of this is about bad planning and straightforward bureaucracy.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Vaizey: Finally, the Government have already shown how forward-looking they are, under the stewardship of this brilliant Minister.

Calum Kerr: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Vaizey: I will tell you in a minute why that is, Mr Deputy Speaker, after I have taken this noisy intervention.
Calum Kerr: If I may interrupt the self-praise for one moment, I hang on the former Minister’s every word and I am worried. He said that he would make three recommendations. The second one was about giving his replacement more powers, the third was about more powers to BDUK, but the first escapes me. I am sure it will be earth-shattering, so would he mind helping me out with his first recommendation?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call the honourable Edward Vaizey.

Mr Vaizey: Right honourable.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Edward Vaizey PC. Oh yes, your father was a peer.

Mr Vaizey: Thank you for keeping me on my toes, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) has given me a chance to rehearse my entire speech again, but let me give him the edited highlights. My recommendations were: first, one annual robust data analysis of fixed and mobile broadband connections; secondly, more power for my right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital and Culture; and thirdly, more power for Broadband Delivery UK to help telcos to navigate the bureaucracy of councils.

Finally, I was going to say how far-seeing and forward-looking this Government have become, thanks to my right hon. Friend the Minister. Again, I heartily endorse the proposals announced in the autumn statement to invest in planning 5G networks. Let us be satisfied with where we are. We had a rural broadband programme that has delivered exactly what it said on the tin. We are going to see increased speeds come through new technologies such as G.fast, but the Government are now quite rightly pushing for the next phase, fibre to the premises and 5G networks. Let us start planning for a gigabit Britain.

3.54 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas); he and I have had some knockabout over the years on certain issues. In this debate he has created a festive spirit, so I start by wishing you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and all the staff of Parliament a merry Christmas and a prosperous 2017.

I am going to talk not about darkest Peru but about brightest Anglesey. I am going to talk not about the 95%, who are always talked about, but about the 5% who are left behind—the 5% who are not expected to get superfast broadband in the initial roll-out. This 5% are normally the ones without gas mains. This 5% will struggle to get a 3G mobile signal, let alone a 4G or 5G signal. This 5% will not, as a consequence of having poor in-plan signals, get smart meters when they are rolled out, because they require a mobile signal. This is the forgotten 5%, and it does not have to be like that.

Major projects start by promising a 95% threshold. I think we should be talking about 100%. Then, if there is difficulty, let us deal with those areas, rather than allowing a 95% threshold every time there are major projects and major roll-outs. It is time to be more inclusive and more universal, so let us talk about 100%.

The 5% I am talking about actually pay more for their heating and other utilities. They pay—this is an important point—exactly the same as anybody who gets full 4G coverage and full superfast broadband. They pay exactly the same, and they should be treated the same, in my humble opinion.

These people are often in peripheral and rural areas. My constituency is on the periphery of Wales; it is predominantly rural. Yes, people choose to live there; people choose to visit the area and to move into it, and they are very welcome in north-west Wales and Anglesey, as you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, as a regular visitor. However, I am sure that you have difficulty in the coastal area of Anglesey in picking up broadband or a mobile signal. I have argued that, in the 21st century, we should have 21st-century technology across the United Kingdom.

I am going to divert somewhat from the right hon. Gentleman’s consensual approach and remind him, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) did, about the previous Labour Government’s promise to deliver a universal service obligation by 2012. I recall arguing for it when the coalition Government came in in 2010 and being told, first, that it was not ambitious enough, and then that it was not possible. Then, all of a sudden, about this time last year, the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, stood up and said—I do not think he even consulted the Minister at the time—that we would have a universal service obligation by 2020. That was a complete U-turn, which I very much welcomed.

Mr Vaizey: Labour promised 100% coverage of 2 megabits; it did not propose a universal service obligation that allows someone who does not have broadband to demand it. When the Prime Minister announced it, he had, indeed, consulted Ministers.

Albert Owen: The right hon. Gentleman is leading with his chin. If he checks Hansard, he will see that he has not said the opposite on many occasions. He will have said it was not possible. He will have said that the Government were not going to deliver it. However, all of a sudden, it was not just their ambition but their flagship policy. I welcome that, but I want that flagship policy to come in as soon as possible.

I recently had a meeting—one of several meetings—with service providers, BT Openreach, and constituents and local business people who are finding it difficult to operate because of the poor broadband coverage. The chief executive officer of BT Openreach has agreed to visit my constituency to see the problems and the challenges. I have been out with engineers, and I do understand the topography and some of the other issues they have to deal with. However, I do not accept that in the 21st century, when we have put a man on the moon and I can talk to my daughter in Melbourne, Australia, we cannot get a decent signal. Rural, peripheral areas like the Faroe Islands can get 100% broadband coverage. If there is a political will, it is technically possible to do it.

I am at therefore at one with the new Minister in bringing in his Digital Economy Bill, but I do have a few questions for him. He has been talked up as the great successor to the previous Minister, and he has a real challenge on his hands to live up to his reputation, but I want him to go further and tell this House how the
roll-out of universal broadband is actually going to work, because all we hear at the moment is words. Who is Ofcom going to ask to roll this out? Are we going to go to the market forces that have failed many areas of the United Kingdom thus far in relation to mobile? I have dozens of mobile operators phoning up and saying, “Do you want a connection?”, and when I tell them where I live they are unable to do it, so the market is not a magic solution. What secondary legislation will follow the Digital Economy Bill to deliver this? I welcome the Bill, which lifts our status as a country in moving forward in the digital age, but how will it work in practice?

I want to make the new Minister an offer that I made to the previous one: for my constituency—on the periphery; rural, semi-rural and urban—to be a pilot scheme for the new universal service obligation. I am sure that, working with private companies and with the Welsh Government, we can deliver full coverage. At the moment, we have just 79.9% superfast broadband, 6.4% ultrafast broadband, and 14.5% below the speeds that we now call superfast broadband. There is a challenge there for the country as a whole, as well as in my constituency.

I support the universal service obligation and the Government’s intention to have it for 2020. I know the Minister is a decent person, and I ask him to give a gift to the people of Ynys Môn—the isle of Anglesey—today by saying, “Yes, we will look at having the isle of Anglesey as a pilot scheme for the future.” Then I will work with him and his Government to get the USO on Anglesey and across the United Kingdom.

4.2 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for opening this debate so knowledgeably.

My constituency is one of the most rural in England. Earlier this year, on 11 May, I called on the then Prime Minister, the right hon. David Cameron, to honour his commitment that every home and business should have access to broadband by the end of this Parliament. I therefore warmly welcome the inclusion in the Chancellor’s autumn statement of a provision for the deployment of over £1 billion to boost broadband speeds with the help of a digital infrastructure fund which, I am ever hopeful, will provide the universal service obligation.

It is self-evident that today everybody needs a good broadband speed: it has become almost as important a utility as water and electricity. As the representative of Gloucestershire, and I praise him for what he did for my constituency and county, I have consistently campaigned for better broadband provision in my constituency, either by supporting private business to receive installation contracts or by lobbying the Government to increase public investment. Gloucestershire County Council, in conjunction with Fastfashires, has seen almost 40,000 homes in my constituency receive superfast broadband over the two phases since it was introduced in 2014. That has been funded by a combination of funds from the county council and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, with a total investment of almost £28 million. I am glad to note that a further, third phase is soon to begin and will fill in any gaps and, I hope, leave most of my constituents with a reliable and appropriate internet connection.

In 2010, the coalition Government announced that Britain would have the best superfast broadband network in Europe by 2012, but that was postponed until 2015 and replaced by the less ambitious aim of having “the fastest broadband of any major European country”. I praise the Government for making progress. I have cited the Akamai tables, which show the UK’s position in relation to Peru, and those same international tables show that Britain is the 12th country in the league. Given that we are the fifth largest economy, we cannot be complacent about our broadband provision.

As with the introduction of any utility, cost-benefit analysis must be undertaken and considered. According to the Government’s own 2013 “UK Broadband Impact Study”, availability of faster broadband will add about £17 billion to the UK’s economy by 2024. The bulk of that money would come from improvements in productivity. In his autumn statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was very keen to stress that we need to improve that. That would also safeguard employment in areas such as Wrexham, which would otherwise be left at an unfair disadvantage.

From an environmental perspective, a universal service obligation will offer additional benefits. Annually, 1.4 billion miles in commuting by car, 3.2 billion miles in business travel through increased use of online collaboration,
and 1 billion kWh of electricity through broadband-using firms shifting their server capacity on to more efficient cloud platforms will be saved by the universal service obligation. All of that equates to a saving of 1.6 million tonnes of carbon dioxide each year.

As I said, I strongly support the digital infrastructure fund announced in this year’s autumn statement. However, that investment will be severely diminished if there is no blanket improvement of mobile phone signals across the whole country. Although the introduction of 5G in major conurbations is warmly welcome, there are still great swathes of Britain, particularly rural areas, including in my constituency, that do not even experience an adequate 3G signal. Something must be done to improve the foundation of this country’s digital capacity.

The absence of phone signals—so-called not spots—should be a thing of the past in this country in the 21st century. In the Cotswolds, villages such as Great Rissington, Chedworth and Quennington are notorious for having a poor mobile phone signal. Indeed, there is a certain spot four miles from Cirencester on the A433—the Fosse way that goes through my constituency and a very busy road—where I know that my mobile phone is going to cut out. Surely in this country we should be able to do something about that. The mobile infrastructure policy is crucial in tackling the unacceptable problem whereby 20% of the UK is affected by not spots. One thing follows the other. If we have good broadband infrastructure, we can solve the mobile infrastructure problem.

Vodafone, EE and O2 have all successfully worked across the country to erect and share masts, including seven in my constituency. The world is moving on. I recently met a major Chinese telecoms firm, ZTE, which plans to gain £2 billion of the £20 billion UK telecoms market by 2025 from a standing start, using mainly fibre and wireless technology. For BT, that does not bode well. It is over-reliant on outdated copper wires when the world is moving towards fibre and wireless technology. It must adapt, otherwise it will simply go out of business.

The Government and regulators need to be mindful of the danger that when broadband and good mobile phone coverage are provided by companies with bespoke solutions, some of the smaller companies increase the cost to customers by more than the cost of inflation. That is a new and growing scourge that my right hon. friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) talked about having a 100% commitment, and that is exactly what is happening in Scotland. Our 100% superfast broadband commitment far outstrips the UK Government’s plans, which are limited to the universal service obligation of just 10 megabits per second. Incidentally, the Government risk repeating a key mistake of the past, which is to deliver the minimum required for today’s needs when they should be delivering what will be needed tomorrow.

The SNP tabled innovative amendments to the Digital Economy Bill. We were concerned, as we continue to be, that the UK Government’s unwillingness to engage indicates a lack of genuine commitment to extending broadband coverage. Our ambition for Scotland’s economy and our public services requires a digitally skilled and empowered workforce. Digital connectivity is critical to opening up economic opportunity in every part of Scotland, and I know that that will be reflected in the other nations of the UK. A report by Deloitte for the Scottish Futures Trust in July made it clear that if Scotland became a world leader in digitalisation, GDP could increase by over £13 billion by 2030 and generate an additional 175,000 jobs in Scotland, while also improving health outcomes and helping to end the digital divide, particularly in rural communities.

To achieve that, we need to address the shortage in specialist digital skills that risks becoming a growth bottleneck. There is an immediate demand for women and men with strong specialist skills, and that sits side by side with the need to develop a broader pipeline over time. The Scottish Government are working with partners to meet the challenges set out in the 2014 digital skills investment plan. They are raising awareness, especially among girls and young women, with a curriculum that is relevant and responsive from school through to university, and continuing to create and highlight new pathways into these new and changing jobs.

As I have mentioned, the SNP tabled innovative amendments to the Digital Economy Bill, and we are concerned that they were not taken up. The Secretary of State could have introduced a broadband connection
voucher scheme to allow the end user to access a broadband service other than that supplied by the provider of the universal service obligation under part 2 of the Communications Act 2003. That would have gone some way to addressing the issues raised by the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness. I think that that should still be considered, so I hope the Minister will look, even at this late stage, at how to accommodate it. Such a scheme would provide a replacement for the previous UK Government broadband connection voucher scheme, which ran from 2013 to 2015, that encouraged small and medium-sized enterprises to take up superfast broadband. It was a good idea, and it helped over 40,000 SMEs. The Minister could also have committed, as his predecessor did, to extending the rights of consumers with mobile coverage so that they have the same rights of service in contracts as those with fixed broadband, yet he did not do so.

Rural Scotland’s poor mobile coverage stems from Westminster having treated it as an afterthought for decades. Although I give a guarded welcome to the support for 5G and the trials of it, there is a lack of ambition on that as well. The widespread uptake of smartphones and tablets has led to a very large growth in demand for mobile data services. For example, between 2011 and 2015, mobile data traffic in the UK increased by 710%. Analysys Mason forecasts that by 2030 levels of mobile data traffic before wi-fi offload could be more than 45 times greater than in 2014.

Rural Scotland’s mobile connectivity is still suffering and struggling because the licensing of the mobile spectrum has been used by the UK Government as a cash cow and a way of making money, rather than as critical infrastructure development that is essential for our country. In the UK, the 3G and 4G spectrum auctions raised billions for the Treasury, but other countries have sought to prioritise greater coverage as a first port of call. The 4G licence auction required 95% coverage for each nation within the UK, which contrasts poorly with Germany’s “outside in” approach to licence obligations. Like the UK, Germany required an overall 98% coverage as an EU member state, but it also needed 97% coverage in each of the federal states. The consumer magazine Which? has found that Scots have access to a 4G signal only 50.4% of the time in Scotland, Wales and south-west England are the regions with the lowest access to mobile data in general, with access less than 80% of the time, which is a shocking figure. As of December 2015, nearly half—48%—of Scotland’s landmass had no data coverage whatsoever.

Reliable and high-quality fixed and mobile broadband connections support growth in productivity, efficiency and labour force participation across the whole economy. That is why the SNP Scottish Government have made progressive pledges on expanding fixed-line broadband. Action taken by the Scottish Government means that we are on track to delivering fibre access to at least 95% of premises in Scotland by end of 2017. We are working with mobile operators to improve and increase 4G coverage across Scotland, and using the dualling of the A9 to put in 4G is helping us to move that on. By the end of 2017, all four mobile operators—EE, O2, Virgin and Three—will provide 95% of premises in Scotland with indoor 4G coverage. The Scottish Government have also contracted over mobile connectivity than fixed-line broadband, as the spectrum policy and other important levers remain reserved to Westminster.

To conclude, rural Scotland must not be an afterthought again. As we move on to 5G, the UK Government must prioritise rural areas as part of the 5G licence spectrum auction.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): We have two speakers to get in before half-past 4. If they could split the time, it would be very helpful.

4.20 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Thank you for your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I was not here for the opening speeches.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for securing such an important debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), who said that he was now in festive mode. All I would say is, for the sake of the family, step it up a little before next Sunday.

Members will see very rapidly what ambitions I have. Much of what was said by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey and my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) was about how badly served their areas are. I, too, have those problems. I, too, have businesses without connectivity and so on.

I am also a neighbour of the Minister. We share roads that go through villages that sit next door to one another and we, too, have these problems. I therefore point out that he knows only too well how difficult it is to deliver broadband in rural areas. Given that Ofcom writes about some of our postcodes, “Ofcom does not currently provide any information on this because the speeds are so poor,” I think we are more than aware that work needs to be done on this.

I am interested in what the legal right to broadband actually means. As the Digital Economy Bill progresses and we roll out the universal service obligation, I am interested to understand more explicitly what that means. I welcome the broadband universal service obligation and was pleased to hear the Minister say in Culture, Media and Sport questions that the same thing would happen for mobile connectivity.

Better Broadband for Suffolk is on track to deliver 96% coverage, which is one point above the national average. However, my constituency will only reach somewhere in the upper eighties. That will leave an enormous number of my constituents without mobile and broadband connectivity. A recent survey that I have collected in the last six weeks, which have I sent to the Minister, shows that 55% of people do not have adequate broadband coverage. The coverage in the constituency is 0.4%. People cannot bank online. The Government expect people to do more and more online—complete their tax returns, register their cars and so on. If they cannot get online or if their connection drops off, it is very hard to do those things. Broadband should be the fourth utility.

Rural communities are affected more than most. We have heard about farmers and I will not go over the same points again, but they are innovators. Farmers need connectivity, not only for their health and safety, but to work the topography drones and so on that allow them to seed their land as they want to. They need it for
their basic payment schemes, which often collapse when they are trying to enter the data. We are encouraging people to have rural businesses. If there is no connectivity, people do not want to go to the bed and breakfasts and enjoy what Suffolk has to offer.

There will also be health issues as we start using telemedicine. For example, there are insulin pumps that upload information to the cloud all the time. That cannot be done without connectivity and that will affect the health of individuals. Nobody minds how connectivity is given to them on phones or on broadband—they just want it. They do not want to hear statistics, they want action.

The survey I conducted showed that 56% of respondents had difficulty with broadband, 55% said that mobile coverage was poor and 70% experienced failure. Bury St Edmunds has 4G only 51% of the time.

As we move forward, could we show a little bit of initiative, locking enterprise zones into hard-to-reach villages, such as, for example, Creeting, out of the back of Stowmarket enterprise zone, and Moreton Hall out of the back of Bury St Edmunds? Could we also take up the churches’ offer of masts on churches? Mostly, could the Minister consider Suffolk, with the A143, the road with the worst coverage and the most not spots, becoming a pilot and thereby the true exemplar of how to do it?

4.25 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): People consider broadband to be the fourth utility. Just as they turn on a tap and get water, flick a switch for electricity or turn a dial for gas, people’s lifestyle and expectations have been geared to broadband. It is not sold as a luxury, it is a requirement for entertainment, education and trade.

Few people have any real concept of the journey or technology behind water, electricity and gas before it is presented as a consumer product. It is no different with broadband. Consumers may not know the technical details of how these utilities work, but they know that dirty water is unacceptable. Broadband that is too slow fits into the same category. All the technical babble belongs to the technicians. They use it, maybe ironically, to speed up conversations. The customers, in their house or workplace, do not want excuses or apologies, they just want broadband to do the job.

We have progressed from speeds of 56 kilobits per second, which allowed us to access the first basic web browsers. We have transitioned to the introduction of wi-fi services and the rapid growth of users accessing the internet via mobile devices. We no longer live in a world where families crowd around the wireless to listen to “The Ovaltineys”. Families expect to be able to watch a movie, surf the internet, interact on social media and play games with people across the globe, all at the same time.

In 2006, BT introduced broadband services of up to 8 megabits per second. Now many homes and businesses can access 200. Ten years from now in 2026, after another 10 years of progress, will we be able to say that our technology has advanced faster than in the past 10 years? It may be difficult to predict, but we need to identify what the internet will be used for in the future.

Will the internet be used to control a greater range of household items that integrate with each other, or perhaps to experience the next generation of augmented or virtual reality? Predicting the future is not easy. Back in the 1960s, I was promised we would all have jet packs. To my eternal sadness, that did not happen. [Interjection.] I definitely did not get mine. We can only make educated guesses at some of the uses, but we can categorically guarantee that 10 megabits per second will not cut it. It shows a staggering lack of ambition and absolutely no foresight.

Scotland is proposing 20 megabits per second, Europe is working towards 30. Up and down the UK, we are still enlarging roads built in the 1960s because we never foresaw the amount of traffic that they would carry. We need to be clear sighted and understand that the broadband strategy we are developing now will affect our capabilities in 20 or 30 years.

With our current level of knowledge, we have no excuse not to build a super-broadband highway that can carry superfast broadband to every user. Importantly, it must be built so that it can be shared by suppliers and is easily accessible for upgrades. The problem is not in the laboratories and it does not lie with the technicians or scientists; it is about digging up roads. A utilities tunnel that carries all utilities and can be partitioned off so that each is separate would help.

How many times have constituents said, “Last week the electricity board came and dug up the street, the month before it was the water board, now it’s broadband. Don’t you guys talk to each other?” The answer is no, they do not. Historically, our approach has been too ad hoc, too focused on the immediate job in front of us instead of the wider needs. Over time, that lack of strategic planning has been very costly. Can the UK Government honestly say that a USO of 10 megabits is ambitious? I think we can do better. That is why I want the UK Government to take responsibility. Simply facilitating greater competition within the market will not necessarily lead to all the results we want on the ground. Many of my constituents are not getting the best possible broadband infrastructure because service providers have deemed that certain areas are not commercially viable.

My constituents expect results, and they are impatient at being left behind. A broadband USO should be something exciting—a policy that represents technological innovation and an ambitious drive towards the future. If we settle for just 10 megabits per second, I am sorry to say that the UK Government’s USO will be remembered only as an “unsuitably slow option”.

4.29 pm

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): Scotland aims for superfast, and my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) demonstrated how we will make that happen—fantastic! I take it, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I have 10 minutes to make some points. I will reflect on the debate only very quickly, as there are a number of points I would like to cover that we have not got to.

First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) not only on securing the debate but on his fine balancing act of calling for more while not talking down his Government. I am sure that the Ministers past and present were both grateful. We then
heard some very interesting points, which I will touch on. I agree with the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), who emphasised that the regions and devolved Administrations are particularly badly affected because of our rurality. As usual, the right hon. Member for Wanage (Mr. Vaizey) turned up, made some noise, praised himself and then went off to see what had been said on Twitter about it, but he raised some interesting points. I agree with him in particular on the need for digital and on the need for the Minister for Digital to have a higher profile and more responsibility in Government.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): That is the crucial point. Our Minister for Digital is separate from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The two of them really need to work hand in hand, so I struggle to understand why that ministerial post does not rest with the other key levers of the business and economy agenda.

Callum Kerr: I thank my hon. Friend, the other Callum in the House, for that excellent point. Telephony and IT used to be relegated to a subdivision of corporate structures but have now been elevated to board level. Exactly the same thing should happen to digital within Government.

With the forgiveness of other hon. Members, I will move on to some of my own specific points, simply for the sake of time—I am sure we are all dying to hear what the new Minister has to say. First, I agree that the USO is a good idea. I will agree with anything that puts more money into infrastructure and connectivity. The Government say their intention is:

“The design of the broadband USO must put people and businesses throughout the United Kingdom at its heart in order to secure the benefits of digital connectivity for as many people as possible, as quickly as possible.”

I wholeheartedly agree with that ambition, but question whether we are on the right track to meet it. In the same Department for Culture, Media and Sport document, the Government go on to say:

“The concept of universal service in telecoms is a long-standing principle, dating back over three decades”. I also agree, to a point. But we are not talking about simple telecoms. Telephony is a binary service: it works or it does not. As we have heard very clearly, broadband is far more complex than that. I recognise that the Government, the DCMS and Ofcom understand that. A document produced alongside the Digital Economy Bill mentions upload, download, latency and other factors critical to the design of an effective USO. But there are still fundamental choices to be made about the design of the universal service obligation.

Ofcom’s summary of responses highlights two paths open to the Government. It says that respondents fall into two groups: those with a vision for a more highly specified service for all and those with a belief that people and businesses simply need a safety net. Are we talking about a vision or a safety net? My fear is—in fact, it is not even a fear, because it is clear—that to date the Government have talked about option two, a safety net.

Let us consider what the USO will look like if we stick to the current path. First, we have the fact that 10 megabits per second has been specified. We can argue whether that is the right speed. I firmly believe that it shows a lack of ambition, but I accept that some industry players say that at the moment it is fast enough. The Government need to raise the bar, particularly given their recent announcement in the autumn statement. As the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) said, 10 megabits will very quickly become out of date.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: When used with old-fashioned copper wires, 10 megabits can become a lot less than that. We need a superfast fibre infrastructure instead of copper wires.

Calum Kerr: I agree, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point.

The danger is that we are following a path similar to that taken in relation to BDUK. It is pragmatic about how much we can do for the money, instead of giving a vision of what we want to have, which is fundamental: critical infrastructure. There is also a real challenge about the ability of the USO to be upgraded. Yes it will be reviewed, and there were some excellent suggestions as to frequency, but I have serious doubts about how it is going to work.

Before I come on to that, let us talk about the telecoms elephant in the room: BT. Let us be clear that BT is the one provider that has said it will do the USO. There is a danger—if I can use that word—that it will all be given to BT. If that is the policy, so be it, but let us do it with our eyes open and be clear about whether that is the right thing to do. I can tell Members that not all my constituents would be particularly enamoured with that. We should all reflect on BT’s submission:

“Existing technologies such as Fibre to the Cabinet and new technologies like long reach VDSL can offer cost-effective solutions for a 10M service but would require further investment if the requirement increased significantly, e.g. to 30M.”

That highlights my point. If we settle for 10 megabits today, what happens when it gets upgraded to 30 megabits?

Let us consider another aspect to this: what does a universal service mean? The documents from Ofcom and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport do not hide the fact that it means something cost-constrained like the telephony USO, where a line can be installed up to the cost of £3,400 and thereafter one pays the difference. Imagine applying that in our constituencies, where the cost of broadband is significantly higher than that for telephony. Imagine I am in need of the USO. I have 2 megabits and upgrade to 10 megabits. I may have to pay, maybe I do not. What happens when we upgrade the service to 30 megabits? Do I have to pay again? Maybe I would have preferred to go to 30 megabits in the first place. There are fundamental flaws and traps ahead of us in terms of design.

The Government have choices. As I said, it feels like they are heading towards a safety net when they need to be more ambitious. Actually, was the autumn statement not a revelation? The Minister announced at the Broadband World Forum that fibre was the future and we all went, “Hurrah! The Government get it!” In the autumn statement, they put some money where their mouth is. The broadband investment fund—granted, the previous Chancellor announced it—suddenly got £400 million. There was talk about a fibre spine backbone. What we have there is ambition.
The Robert Kenny report challenges assumptions about fibre and says: pick where to put in fibre first and do not do “blunt” FTTP—fibre to the premises. I think it lacks ambition in itself, but it is right in one regard: fibre has more impact in rural areas. In the Government schemes, I see absolutely nothing that will help rural areas. I see rural areas getting left behind with 10 megabits, whereas they should be getting fibre. If I am in an urban area with 30 megabits and go to 100 megabits, that would be fantastic but it will not change my life. If I am sat with 0.5 or 1 megabit, it would be transformational. The Government need to revisit the USO and show the same ambition.

I would like to make one final point about how this can be done. If we stick to the current path, the USO will mean nothing in Scotland—absolutely useless. We are aiming for 30 megabits. A 10 megabits USO might satisfy one or two, but that will be it. In the regions of England and in the devolved Administrations, it will mean very little. We can save the USO, however, by turning it into something more flexible—what David Cullen, chair of the Independent Networks Co-operative Association, said was a universal service opportunity. I put forward an amendment for vouchers. Vouchers would unleash the collective powers of our devolved Administrations and our country. I urge the Government to belatedly get behind that idea, because fibre is the future for rural as well as urban.

4.39 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr), the Scottish National party spokesperson, who always speaks with such passion on this subject, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing this welcome debate. He brings considerable expertise in this area to the House.

The starting point for all hon. Members is that everyone must share the benefits of our modern digital society. That is an issue that Members on both sides of the House have championed for many years. The message has come out from this House loud and clear today that broadband and mobile coverage are no longer nice-to-haves but essentials. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness gave an excellent overview of the debate, but he made three particularly important points: first, that we need a plurality of providers in the procurement process, and that one size clearly does not fit all, given the various challenges that the universal service obligation will bring; secondly, that the USO should be extended to road and rail across the UK—I would add waterways—and thirdly, that we must have publication of address-level data. I, too, commend the Ofcom app that helps to collect those data.

My hon. Friends the Members for Brexham (Ian C. Lucas) and for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) clearly demonstrated which areas have been left behind when it comes to investment and the consequences of failing to give rural issues the same priority as those in the rest of the country. As they made clear, digital exclusion has implications not just for our digital economy but for society: for example, it excludes people from the internet of things, and they therefore face higher costs and greater exclusion. The right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who is not back in his place, made two important points: one about increased power for BDUK, which we support, and another about promotion for the Minister for Digital and Culture; no one could disagree with that, not least because it would mean a promotion for me as well, so we will go with that.

The hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) made a very important case on mobile hot spots; that raises important issues for the 5G auction, which I hope that the Minister will address. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) made an impassioned speech about digital skills. I hope that the Government’s digital strategy, when they finally produce it, will address his points at length. The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) explained the dire and shocking levels of access in her constituency. I am sure that the Minister will want to address her points, given that he has the neighbouring constituency.

Finally, the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) set out the staggering lack of ambition in the USO. The lack of ambition in today’s announcement is a particular concern. BDUK estimates that as of March 2016, there were still over 3.1 million premises without the capability to receive superfast broadband. That is expected to decrease to just over 1.9 million by the time BDUK ends, but 5% of premises will still be incapable of receiving speeds of just 10 megabits per second or above—nowhere near that superfast range. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, that figure is even higher, and in rural UK, it is 24%.

The Government have been forced to revise their target for their broadband commitments a number of times, despite the claims from the former Minister, the right hon. Member for Wantage. While we might not be a digital desert, the hon. Member for The Cotswolds was right to warn against complacency. We should be much higher up the international league table.

The broadband investment fund, which was trailed by the former Chancellor in last year’s autumn statement, will take the UK from 2% full fibre coverage to just 7% by 2020; that will reach 2 million of the 27.1 million households in the UK. Full fibre coverage is so poor that the UK does not even warrant a place on the annual European league table. The pledge to reach 7% of households will mean that the UK will finally have the same coverage that Latvia and Lithuania achieved in 2012. It is therefore right to ask the Government about the roll-out of their USO, and we will monitor them closely as it is delivered.

We have yet to see the Ofcom report. Its consultation was not very promising, as it found little industry appetite for delivering the USO. If the process is to be trusted, transparent and fair, all the information should be in the open and part of the procurement process, so that as many providers as possible can participate and we can ensure that the playing field is as level as possible. I cautiously welcome the Government’s statement of their intent to consider different types of providers, such as regional providers and smaller ones using innovative technologies, but I am afraid that they are cautious, given the serious failures around the BDUK procurement. Those failures left BT as the only supplier, and the process was condemned by the Public Accounts Committee for failing to deliver meaningful competition or value...
for money. It is important that the Government give a clear commitment today that community providers and those with different innovative solutions will be consulted and made firmly part of the USO process.

As we have previously discussed, there is no doubt that there is a coalition of support for a much more ambitious USO. That is why we support resetting the USO, through secondary legislation, when it becomes outdated, as it will in the very near future; the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness termed this “digital inflation”. The Minister should bear that clearly in mind. We fully support the proposal from the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness for Low Pay Commission-style oversight of the level of the USO, and we absolutely need more detail today on how often and how it will be reviewed.

As we have seen all too often, businesses and residences see a particular speed advertised, but there is no correlation between that and what they are actually able to download, so we would appreciate an update on the Minister’s work with the Advertising Standards Authority on advertising speeds.

As the Federation of Small Businesses notes, small businesses are disproportionately less likely to have access to acceptable download speeds. Some 46% of businesses in postcodes that cover only small and medium-sized enterprises—namely, business parks—had broadband connections with a maximum speed of less than 10 megabits per second, while 24% had maximum speeds of less than 5 megabits and 12% less than 2 megabits. We fully support the right of small businesses to request a USO themselves—and, crucially, an information campaign to make them aware of those rights. Clarity about how the USO relates to businesses would also be welcome.

On the detail of the USO, we know that connections will be subject to a cost threshold. Are we any closer to knowing what that cost threshold is likely to be, and how many properties it will apply? The Minister knows—we have discussed this many times—that we fully support the intent of the Government. As the Digital Economy Bill makes its way through the other place, I hope Ofcom will have produced its report, so that it can have a much better idea of where this obligation is heading. We urge the Government to take into account the many views of hon. Members in today’s debate. Above all, what I think we have heard is that it is time to be more ambitious, and we certainly need more detail.

Finally, the benefits of more of us being online and more things coming online are clear, but that also presents challenges. It was disappointing that the Digital Economy Bill failed to cover two major areas that we are grappling with in our digital economy: online abuse and data protection. We must make serious progress on tackling online abuse and the responsibility of social media sites. Obviously, we have had some debate around child protection, in terms of accessing age-inappropriate material, but the threats to children and indeed adults are much broader, and it is disappointing that sites such as Facebook continue to take a sincerely hands-off approach, defending themselves as platform-only, whether that is on the sharing of fake news, bullying and abuse, or taking money from organisations with extremist ideology. I noted the Parental Portal that Facebook launched this week, which is welcome, but I would be grateful to hear from the Minister what progress he is making in this area.

On data security and privacy, the rise of big data, particularly around the internet of things, presents huge issues around consent and ethics. We must urgently get to grips with the parameters of big data, and with where consent begins and ends in this changed landscape of data protection. I hope that the Minister will be able to announce some progress on this soon. We are happy to support the Government’s intent; we would just like to see the Minister be a little more ambitious. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to today’s debate.

4.49 pm

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): I join everyone else in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing this debate, and on bringing his serious background and experience from before he was in this place to bear on a very important subject. It is unsurprising that all of us here to discuss this think it is important; that is why we are here. The debate is particularly timely as Ofcom is tantalisingly close to publishing the analysis we commissioned on the factors that will inform the design of the broadband USO.

We are committed to building a country that works for everyone; that means ensuring that nobody is digitally excluded, and “everyone” means everyone. That is one of the motivations underpinning our drive to have a USO. This requires us to ensure that the UK’s digital infrastructure meets not only today’s broadband connectivity needs, but those of tomorrow; that is crucial. Let us be clear: the delivery of fast broadband, particularly in rural areas, is an economic imperative, not simply a “nice to have”—a point made passionately and eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown).

Online abuse was mentioned from the Opposition Front Bench by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh); I know that she personally has received some horrific online abuse. Offences offline are also offences online, but we continue to work hard, especially with the platform providers, to ensure that they take appropriate responsibility for abuse that happens on their platforms. Ultimately, however, it is those who write abusive content who are committing an offence, especially when it is a threat of physical violence or a death threat—something that too many Members of this House have suffered from.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) is of course right: great progress has already been made in this area, and there is still lots more to do. We are on track for 95% of premises across the UK having access to superfast broadband. Some £1.7 billion of public money is being invested. That funding has created more than 4 million potential new superfast broadband connections to date. As a result of this investment and ongoing commercial roll-out, 90% of UK premises can now access these superfast speeds. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) was absolutely right that commercial roll-out is part of the answer, but it is not the whole answer. That is why we have Government intervention as well as commercial roll-out; we need a mixed economy of solutions.

Albert Owen: We have been talking today about the access figures. Does the Minister have the take-up figures, and will he make them available in the Library, because
many areas that are getting the infrastructure are simply not getting the message out to people to connect up?

**Matt Hancock:** That is an important point. The latest take-up figures are about to be published by Ofcom, but the message that needs to go out on take-up is this: in a BDUK area, the more people who take up the connection, the more money goes back into providing more connections for other people. It is incumbent on us as local representatives to get that message out.

We should also get out the message made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) about the Ofcom app, which I have downloaded, so that Ofcom gets the real data from the ground about connectivity in each area. My hon. Friends the Members for Wycombe (Mr Baker) and for Witney (Robert Courts) also made the point that connectivity matters more than technology.

I want to return to the point about farmers made by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds—he is sitting next to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), who also cares a lot about farmers. I loved the phrase used by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds: it is important that we have both a future-proof and a rural-proof approach. In introducing the USO, we have said that 10 megabits per second is an absolute minimum. The legislation provides for that to be revised up. The Scottish Government have chosen to have a fixed figure; I think it is better to have a figure that can be revised up as technology changes.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** My right hon. Friend is making a fantastic contribution on this USO, but the problem with the 95% target is that in rural areas, it will not be met for many more than 5% of customers.

**Matt Hancock:** Of course. Topography means that it is harder to deliver in rural areas, so we are introducing a universal service obligation to ensure that everyone can get hold of broadband.

**Calum Kerr:** I let the Minister away with this bizarre comment in Committee, but he really must stop saying that 10 megabits somehow shows more ambition than 30 megabits. The Scottish Government have a target of 30 megabits by 2021. The UK Government target is 10 megabits by 2020. I know which I prefer.

**Matt Hancock:** We have been through this before; 10 megabits is our approach for the minimum. The hon. Gentleman will have to wait and see what Ofcom has to say.

I will address a partisan point that was brought into an otherwise pretty harmonious debate by the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas). The previous Labour Government did bring in a universal service obligation for connectivity that was set at 28.8 kilobits, but it was unenforced. The hon. Gentleman should stop his point scoring and stick to the bit where he said how brilliantly we are doing now with the ambition that we have put in place.

I gently point out to SNP Members that the Scottish Government are responsible for procurement in Scotland, and it is a pity that procurement there is behind almost every other area of the country. We have been doing everything that we can to push them along, but they really ought to answer for slow provision in Scotland, and I am sure that they will.

I turn to the future and the two f’s: fibre and 5G. Only 2% of premises in the country have a full fibre connection. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) talked about high levels of fibre delivery in Scotland, but that is not true. We have high levels of part-fibre delivery across the UK—it is 90% now, and it is going up to 95%—but that is not full fibre or fibre to the premises. More full fibre is being delivered elsewhere, and we are determined to match that. The autumn statement announced £1 billion for broadband and 5G, and we will consult shortly on exactly how that will be spent.

**George Freeman** (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way; it gives me the chance to thank him sincerely on behalf of my constituents, because my constituency has gone from 25% to 70% fast broadband. Does he agree that we may need creative ways of ensuring that the 5% or 10% of areas, including the most rural, that may never benefit from fibre can get alternative provision?

**Matt Hancock:** My hon. Friend is completely right. We should be open-minded about technologies such as wi-fi. I have two and a half minutes left, so I am going to rattle through some more points.

I congratulate BDUK and Chris Townsend, who has run it for a good period of time, for their incredible delivery. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley was not right to say that BDUK delivers only via BT; there are now six providers. BDUK has done a magnificent job since it was set up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage. Getting mobile connectivity on roads and rail is also incredibly important, and we are pushing that hard. EE has a contract to reach every inch of road in the country by the end of next year. Finally, several Members mentioned business; part of the £1 billion announced in the autumn statement is for ensuring that we have much better delivery for business. That drive is broadly supported.

I hope that I have answered as many points as possible. We will set out further details on the USO shortly. We look forward to working with Members from across the House to ensure that everybody gets the connectivity that they need.

4.58 pm  

**Matt Warman:** I have 80 seconds to sum up this debate, and it is fair to say that there is absolute consensus that Britain must be ambitious if we are deliver on the potential. As the Minister said, the universal service obligation is a starting point, not an end point, for speed and the transformational possibilities. Whether it is wi-fi or fibre that will provide the universal service that we all believe our constituents deserve, I am pleased to see clear agreement that diversity is an important part of the solution.

The Minister is right of course not only to point out that Britain has made huge progress in relatively recent years, but to be ambitious in trying to make even faster progress as the next years creep up on us. We know that our competitors are putting huge amounts of money,
time and research into what will be a transformational period in global history, which will be powered by the internet. That leaves me with seven seconds in which to wish the whole House and, in particular, you, Mr Deputy Speaker, a very merry Christmas.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That is very kind of you.

5 pm
Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As you know, both the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Defence Committee are concerned about the proposed closure of the BBC Monitoring service headquarters at Caversham Park and further reductions in the size of the service. Earlier this afternoon, I received informal information, not yet subsequently confirmed, that the scheme to go ahead with this may be signed between the Foreign Office and the BBC tomorrow. However, in written evidence given to the Defence Committee, the Foreign Office said:

“The new Monitoring Agreement is still in draft, pending signing and any recommendations from the Parliamentary Committees that are holding enquiries into the issue.”

At the beginning of this week, we told both the Foreign Office and the BBC that our report would be coming out at the beginning of next week. Do you agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, that in the light of the undertaking given to our Committee, it would be utterly unacceptable for this agreement to be signed tomorrow, given that the Foreign Office and the BBC know that our report is about to be published? Have you had any indication that a Foreign Office Minister will be coming to the House to make a statement?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I have a couple of points to make. First, I do not think it is correct to circumvent the right hon. Gentleman’s Committee in the way that they have proceeded. On the other matter, I can say that I have absolutely not had any notification from the Foreign Office about a Minister coming here. We both know that it is on the record, and I am sure people are listening very carefully now. It is a very important matter, and if commitments are made, we know that they should be kept. But what I do know, Dr Julian Lewis, is that you will not shy away from ensuring that this is raised, and perhaps an urgent question before the recess could be a route to take.

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I would like to make a correction to an inadvertent error made as this morning’s Culture, Media and Sport questions. We are proud that 20% of DCMS appointments to public bodies since the reshuffle in July have been people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. I said this morning that the figure was 24% and I wanted to correct the record for the House at the earliest opportunity. We are strongly committed to diversity in public appointments, and I think this figure demonstrates that fact.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think the House welcomes that correction, and I am sure the Minister will sleep better tonight for it.

PETITION

Exoneration of Persons Convicted of Gross Indecency and Related “Homosexual Offences”

5.3 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I rise to present a petition of more than 600 names on the exoneration of persons convicted of gross indecency and related “homosexual offences”. I particularly wish to thank Colin Livett and Danny Norton for all their work on this petition.

The petition states:

The petition of citizens of the UK,

Declares that there are many people who were convicted of gross indecency and related “homosexual offences” prior to the Sexual Offences Act 2003; further that these offences were decriminalised by that Act and would not now be an offence; and further that any person (alive or deceased) convicted of any such offence should be exonerated.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to exonerate automatically any persons alive or deceased who were convicted of gross indecency and related “homosexual offences” prior to the Sexual Offences Act 2003 in cases where their offences were decriminalised by that Act.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001998]
HMS President and Historic Warships

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

5.4 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is my privilege to introduce this short debate on the preservation of HMS President and other historic warships.

When a country’s naval history is as rich and as deep as ours, it is not easy to decide which historic vessels should be kept for future generations and which should be discarded. Having observed, since childhood, the scrapping of many famous warships, I have concluded that the few that survive generally do so more by good luck than by any settled policy. The establishment of the Heritage Lottery Fund, and more recently the LIBOR Fund, gave an opportunity to change all that, and we need to consider whether such change has really taken place.

Regrettably, the signs are not auspicious. HMS Whimbrel is, without doubt, the most famous fighting vessel of world war two still at risk and available for preservation. She was part of the most successful submarine-hunting formation in the Battle of the Atlantic—the 2nd Escort Group led by Captain F J “Johnnie” Walker—and was present at the signing of the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945. She survives to this day, purely by chance, in the possession of the Egyptian navy, which is willing to sell her to the National Museum of the Royal Navy for £725,000. The museum has had help from the Government with other projects in the past, and this is much appreciated. Yet, as its director general, Professor Dominic Tweddle, wrote to me recently, after a failed LIBOR bid: “Whimbrel is the most important Second World War vessel still afloat ... It is odd that, as a nation, we are keen on saving buildings (good), but have a blind spot about the sea and ships.”

By sheer coincidence, an exact counterpart to HMS Whimbrel, with her vital role in Germany’s second deadly U-boat campaign, is a ship designed to deal with the first. HMS President is the last surviving submarine hunter from world war one. She is also one of only three major great war vessels in the United Kingdom, the other two being the light cruiser HMS Caroline in Northern Ireland and the monitor HMS M33 in Portsmouth, though HM CMB 4 at Duxford—a coastal motor boat on which the Victoria Cross was won—should not be overlooked.

I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this debate; to the dozens of hon. Members, from five political parties, who supported early-day motion 685 to save the President; and to well over 11,000 members of the public who have signed the online petition so far.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is always an assiduous and welcome attendee at the national merchant navy memorial service at the national monument in Tower Hill in my constituency every first Sunday in September. May I assure him that he has the support of Labour Members for his campaign to preserve HMS President and other historic vessels?

Dr Lewis: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman who has a long record of public service—personally in the emergency services, and, indeed, his wife as well as a particular connection with the Royal Navy as I well know. I thank him for his remarks.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. It is very important that HMS President is restored not only as a legacy—it is a very important vessel—but for my constituency, as we probably stand to benefit from it. Fibrwrap in my constituency is likely to be doing the renovations. I congratulate him and thank him for bringing this forward.

Dr Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that support and congratulate him on his bid for a stage at which we have not yet arrived, but at which I hope we will arrive if we are successful in our campaign to save HMS President.

Colleagues in the upper House, such as Admiral Lord Boyce, have also spoken out strongly in support. Following unsuccessful bids to the Heritage Lottery Fund and the LIBOR fund, HMS President now faces a real and imminent prospect of being scrapped. Unless urgent funding is secured, and despite generously extended pro bono mooring arrangements at Chatham, she will probably “meet her breaker” early next year. This is because the HMS President Preservation Trust, which has been battling to preserve her, can now afford to do so only for a matter of weeks.

One need hardly stress the irony of a warship of this vintage and this significance suffering such a fate in the midst of centenary commemorations of the conflict in which she fought, and just one year short of the centenary of her own entry into service, under her original name of HMS Saxifrage, in 1918.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): HMS President is a rare example of Scottish engineering. Has the right hon. Gentleman thought to approach the Scottish Government for aid in preserving her?

Dr Lewis: I am sure that people listening to this debate will, if they have not already done so, immediately reach for their word processors in order to take up that extremely helpful suggestion.

Launched in January 1918, HMS Saxifrage, as she was then called, was designed to protect the vital merchant shipping on which our country depended. Crewed by 93 men, she was a Flower-class anti-submarine Q-ship. These sloops were originally intended to be minesweepers, but with the growing threat from submarines they were transferred to convoy escort duties. What makes their tale, and that of HMS President in particular, so historically significant was that they were deliberately configured as bait for U-boats. They were fitted out to look like merchantmen in order to invite attack by submarines on the surface, sometimes when investigating why their first torpedo had failed to finish off a vessel which in reality was packed with hidden buoyancy aids and armed with hidden large-calibre guns.

At the start of a U-boat attack, “panic parties” would frantically abandon ship while the gun crew stayed out of sight until the submarine came within range. Then, the Q-ship would run up the White Ensign, break out the concealed guns and open fire. It is worth noting the extreme bravery of those who served aboard these ships: they were sitting targets putting their lives on the line for their families, their friends and our
country. As I have mentioned in this House once before, when the same hazardous technique was tried in world war two it met with disaster, and the Q-ships Cape Howe and Willamette Valley were sunk in June 1940 with considerable loss of life, including the courageous father of my friend Ray Brooks, Stoker Bert Brooks, who served in the Cape Howe’s engine room.

The President is the last surviving example of this type of vessel, but her work did not end with the Armistice of November 1918. Four years later, she came in from her service on the high seas to find a permanent mooring on the Thames. In the heart of London, her role became that of a Royal Naval Reserve drill ship, and the Saxifrage was renamed HMS President. During the inter-war period she played a crucial role in training our country’s naval personnel, but her combat days were renewed during the Blitz. She was fitted out with anti-aircraft guns and helped to defend some of London’s most famous landmarks, including St Paul’s Cathedral and, of course, the Houses of Parliament. Not only was she protecting London’s skies, but she was fulfilling a more covert function. Her cabins and compartments were secret meeting places for the Special Operations Executive, which planned sabotage and subversion in occupied Europe, and she also served as a headquarters for the French Resistance.

At the end of world war two, HMS President remained on the Thames and renewed her role as a training vessel. Together with her sister-ship, HMS Chrysanthemum, also moored near Blackfriars Bridge, she was the home of the London division of the Royal Naval Reserve, which was when I first encountered her, as an RNR seaman, in the late 1970s.

In 1988, her military role finally came to an end. She was taken on by a social enterprise company and became a successful venue for start-up firms and for corporate and charity events. She served as an iconic location for some leading companies, and continued to provide a valuable educational and cultural space for schoolchildren, sea cadets, veterans and members of the public.

That brings me to her current predicament. From the time she was taken into private ownership in 1988, she was financially self-sustaining. However, in February this year, due to the pending works on London’s super-sewer, she had to leave her moorings on the Embankment. The site was about to become an outflow for the new sewer system and, as such, was no place for an important heritage vessel.

That caused her to be taken to Chatham docks, very close to the area represented by my hon. Friend the Minister, who may, I trust, pay her a visit if she has not done so already. It is, unfortunately, during HMS President’s time there that her condition has steadily deteriorated—that is no fault of the Minister’s—and the move has meant that she can no longer generate the steady flow of income that previously paid for her upkeep. She is now showing her age: in some areas, the hull is just a few millimetres thick. There is no doubt that her situation is precarious and that restoration work cannot be postponed.

The HMS President Preservation Trust applied to the Treasury for just under £3 million of LIBOR money. About half of that was to fund the restoration of the ship herself, including the hull, the original deck gun, which will be reinstated if the ship survives, the navigation equipment and so on. The other half was to construct a new mooring on the north bank of the Thames, just to the east of London bridge. This mooring would restore HMS President to her rightful home on the Thames, where she had been for more than 90 years. It has been specifically designed to make her even more accessible to the public, ensuring that she can serve for generations to come.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): In relation to the public and accessibility, would the right hon. Gentleman echo my sentiments about the frigate Unicorn? It is the oldest British-built warship still afloat, and one of only six ships built before 1850 that survive. It is of great interest to tourists who come to Dundee and to Scotland, and it is easily accessible to all who visit.

Dr Lewis: I am very glad to hear that the hon. Lady is taking an interest in that vessel, because we have this national register of historic ships, which are absolute historical gems, and we must do everything in our power to keep them in existence.

The planned restoration would secure HMS President’s future for the next 100 years. It must have been challenging for the Chancellor to have to decide between hundreds of worthy causes bidding for LIBOR money. Sadly, although he distributed over £100 million in this round of funding, saving this unique vessel from world war one and HMS Whimbrel from world war two did not feature on the list of grants. In the case of the President, I understand that the principal reasons concerned the level of expert advice involved in compiling the bid, the level of oversight for the delivery of a £3 million capital investment, and a worry that the charity’s modest size could undermine its ability to see the project through.

Yet, the point about expert advice was simply incorrect. The preservation trust actually commissioned, as part of the bid, the late Martyn Heighton of National Historic Ships UK, generally accepted as the top British expert in the historic ships field; Bill Williamson, a consultant naval architect and marine engineer with Houlder Ltd; and Rupert Keyzar of GW Surveying Ltd. A number of competitive engineering quotes were sought and obtained from companies of the calibre of Braemar, SPS and Beckett Rankine. It is surprising that these names did not carry sufficient weight with the LIBOR grants team.

Possibly the problem was that the trust had too much information to give. I gather that bids for LIBOR grants must use a template application form that is limited in length, and that the trust offered these experts’ opinions as appendices. Frustratingly, though perhaps understandably, these offerings were declined. To be clear to the Minister, the trust does have the information that the grants team said in its assessment was lacking. The trust believes that it could have more than adequately provided the information, and I even have a copy here—a rather thick ring binder—if the Minister would like to see it.

On the governance concerns highlighted by the grants team, I fully accept that almost £3 million is a significant sum of public money that must be appropriately safeguarded. Oversight is essential, and that is why the trust secured the support of well-resourced and world-renowned heritage organisations, including National Historic Ships UK and the Imperial War Museum. The trust would be more than happy for these organisations to take on the supervision or even the management of
the restoration process, so as to provide sufficient confidence in the application of public funds. I gather that the grants team itself acknowledges that third-party supervision could be a sensible solution. Indeed, this would be the preferred course of action for the trust itself, but the funds must be found now, before it is too late to save the ship.

I do find it encouraging that it is not a Treasury Minister attending this debate, but the Minister responsible for heritage and world war one commemorations. Surely there is a solution that can be found within that remit. Accepting that the next round of LIBOR distributions will be too late, I trust the Minister will do all she can to work with me, the trust and supportive colleagues to tap into other sources of funding so that this unique historical artefact is saved from destruction.

The petition to the Government secured more than 10,000 signatures in a very short space of time in the run-up to the autumn statement and the LIBOR decision, so there is no denying the public appetite to see this ship saved. The petition contained signatures from every constituency in the UK—because HMS President is truly a national heritage site. She has a rich history of service to our country, both in military and in cultural terms, and the potential to pay her own way in the future once safely and securely berthed on the Thames, just as she did for so many years in the past. That is why I have called this urgent debate to ensure that we do our utmost to find a solution to protect her. We must not let 100 years of history to be turned into scrap metal and wiped out forever. It is time we did our duty, just as HMS President did hers.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) for introducing this debate, and colleagues from across both Houses, including Admiral Lord Boyce in the other place, for their support of our naval heritage.

I share the interest and passion of my right hon. Friend, and others in the Chamber, for our naval history, but beyond my own personal view, I can assure colleagues that the Government are also strong in their support for the preservation of important historic warships, as well as all other artefacts of importance to the history, culture and people of the UK.

Our museums, such as the National Maritime Museum, the Imperial War Museum and the National Museum of the Royal Navy, do tremendous work to help protect and preserve these important historic warships, which are a memorial to brave undertakings and the many lives that were lost. I would like to highlight some of the excellent maritime projects that the Heritage Lottery Fund and its umbrella body, the National Heritage Memorial Fund, have enabled through their funding across the UK. Due in part to contributions from the HLF, many historic ships have new life as museums to our nation’s naval heritage, including Cutty Sark and the Mary Rose, whose restorations received significant contributions from the HLF. Local to my own constituency in Chatham, the HLF and the National Heritage Memorial Fund have helped to conserve many historic warships, including the last surviving world war two destroyer, HMS Cavalier.

Chatham dockyard closed in 1984, but as a result of investment from the lottery and others, including Government, it is now a centre for heritage and regeneration, and home to many of our historic ships. I have taken great pleasure in visiting Chatham dockyard on many occasions and seeing HMS Cavalier and HMS Ocelot, as well as stepping aboard HMS Chatham, whose creel now has pride of place on my parliamentary office wall. It is of course in Chatham that HMS President currently lies. When my right hon. Friend spoke about her showing her age and deteriorating quickly, I was not sure if he was referring to the ship or to me!

The Heritage Lottery Fund has already supported over 1,600 first world war heritage projects, providing £82 million of funding since 2010. As my right hon. Friend stated, this includes two of the remaining three first world war warships: HMS Caroline, the only first world war battle of Jutland ship still afloat; and HMS Monitor 33, the sole remaining veteran from the Gallipoli campaign.

The £15 million award to the National Museum of the Royal Navy to restore HMS Caroline is the largest grant that the Heritage Lottery Fund has ever made in Northern Ireland. HMS Caroline opened to the public on 31 May following a major refurbishment, to coincide with the centenary of the battle of Jutland.

Similarly, the Royal Naval Museum received £1.8 million in funding for HMS Monitor 33. That fantastic project has not only enabled the ship to be opened to the public for the first time, as public access to the dry docks had previously been limited, but allowed the museum to showcase a historic dock from 1801 that put Portsmouth at the centre of the Navy’s power.

My Department also sponsors Royal Museums Greenwich—more commonly known as the National Maritime Museum—which funds National Historic Ships UK, an independent organisation that gives objective advice to Government, devolved Administrations, local authorities, funding bodies and the historic ships sector on all matters relating to historic vessels in the UK.

With that in mind, I would like to take this opportunity to put on record my appreciation of the great work of the late Martyn Heighton, who recently passed away. Martyn made an enormous contribution as the former director of National Historic Ships UK, and he was respected by everyone who knew him as an expert in the field. Before taking up his role at National Historic Ships UK, he was closely involved in the creation of the Merseyside Maritime Museum at the restored Albert dock. That was one of the first regeneration schemes for Liverpool docks, raising the profile of Liverpool’s maritime heritage. He was also lead arts and culture officer for Bristol City Council, where he supported the first international festival of the sea in 1996. I also commend the contribution he made to establish the Mary Rose as a modern museum in Portsmouth while in post as director.

Martyn will be much missed, but his legacy continues through the work of the National Historic Ships UK and its national register of more than 1,000 historic vessels. The register contains a sub-group of vessels—the national historic fleet—of which there are 200 in total.
HMS President bears that prestigious status, as one of the last three purpose-built vessels surviving from the first world war, along with HMS Caroline and HMS Monitor 33. HMS President has been a regular sight on the Thames for many years, and I am delighted that an estimated 11 million people saw the vessel “dazzled” during 2014 and 2015, as part of our first world war centenary arts programme.

Karl Turner: Will the Minister give way?

Tracey Crouch: I do not really have time, but I will give way briefly.

Karl Turner: The Minister has a very good relationship with my home city of Hull, which will host the city of culture next year. Does she agree that it would be brilliant if HMS President were to be renovated in my home city? In fact, she could probably stay there for the year of the city of culture.

Tracey Crouch: The hon. Gentleman has put in a fine bid for the restoration company in his constituency. I assure him that I will be in Hull at some point next year, celebrating the city of culture.

I hope that what I have said so far shows that the Government, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the National Heritage Memorial Fund recognise the significance of these important, historic ships. I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware that the HMS President Preservation Trust has made several applications to the Heritage Lottery Fund, as well as to the National Heritage Memorial Fund.

May I briefly explain that HLF funding decisions are taken at arm’s length from Government, and I am, quite rightly, not involved in the individual grant-making process? The National Heritage Memorial Fund was set up to safeguard the UK’s most important heritage at risk. Although it recognises the historical importance of HMS President, the National Heritage Memorial Fund was unable to support the proposals because they did not meet the criteria for funding.

In cases such as HMS President, the National Heritage Memorial Fund can only fund emergency works to stop deterioration until further funds can be secured elsewhere for full restoration. The National Heritage Memorial Fund provides advice to unsuccessful applicants so that they can improve their applications. The fund continues to be open to working with the preservation trust to improve its application. I strongly encourage the trust to take up this offer and to listen to the feedback received about how to strengthen its proposals and explore other opportunities.

I commend the efforts regarding HMS Whimbrel Battle of the Atlantic Trust, which has battled for more than a decade to bring the vessel back to the UK. I wish the trust every success in its work to establish a memorial to the ship in Liverpool. I am delighted that the National Museum of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth has shown an interest in housing HMS Whimbrel and is investigating the possibility of bringing it back to the UK. If it was possible for a deal to be reached to return HMS Whimbrel for repair and to develop her as an educational attraction, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the HLF would be happy to have discussions about funding options in respect of transportation and emergency repairs.

The Department recognises the importance of both HMS President and HMS Whimbrel, and the opportunities for education and engagement that they present. I encourage the HMS President Preservation Trust to continue its discussions with the National Heritage Memorial Fund and to listen to the feedback that it has received, exploring opportunities for partnerships with our expert maritime museums in order to strengthen its proposals.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.
PREPARATIONS

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Wednesday’s Opposition day debate on the impact of the Government’s autumn statement on women, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury disparaged and undermined the work of the House of Commons Library. I am sure, Mr Speaker, that you agree with me that the Library is the very heart of our Parliament. It is non-political and non-biased, and it presents research for us all to use. In the same debate, he went on to discredit the research of the Women’s Budget Group—an independent network of economists and academics.

Although I recognise that all research methodologies should be open to robust scrutiny and discussion, there is a pattern emerging in the Library’s gender impact analyses of successive Budgets and autumn statements. The Treasury appears to undermine the Library’s work by calling into question its integrity and objecting to its analysis, yet the Treasury has continually refused to carry out its own gender impact analysis of its economic policies, as is prescribed in the Equality Act 2010.

Mr Speaker, will you advise me please on how best to proceed with this matter to ensure that the Chief Secretary retracts his statement, makes an effort to engage with the Library to discuss and understand its methodologies, or apologises to the Library and the Women’s Budget Group for undermining their sterling research?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, but I fear that she invests me with powers I do not possess. Every Member is responsible for the veracity or otherwise of what he or she says. If any Member feels that he or she has made an incorrect statement in the House, it is open to that Member to correct it, and it should, indeed, be corrected. Where there are matters of debate and argument, I do not think that it is appropriate for me to intrude.

Suffice it to say that I think the hon. Lady. Lady has found her salvation and, no doubt, done what she thinks is right by the fine employees of the Library by raising this point of order, which is now on the record and which, I trust, will be seen by the very Library staff whom, if I may say so without excessive pun, she has just championed.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Ratification of Convention) Bill

Second Reading

9.38 am

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The UK signed the Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence back in June 2012 but has yet to ratify it. The Istanbul convention, as it is better known, is a unique, groundbreaking international legal instrument that enshrines in law the basic human right of women and girls to live lives free of violence and the fear of violence. Crucially, it provides a comprehensive set of mechanisms to achieve those aims. The provisions of the convention aim to prevent violence against women, protect the victims and survivors of abuse, prosecute perpetrators and hold them to account for their actions. It commits Governments to provide not only properly resourced support services through a strategic policy framework, but robust monitoring, data collection and public scrutiny.

The convention is a formidable package of measures, which Scottish Women’s Aid has described as “quite simply the best piece of international policy and practice for eliminating violence against women that exists, setting minimum standards for Government responses to victims and survivors of gender based violence... It is a blueprint for how we move from small change at the margins...to a system that is designed to end domestic abuse and violence against women.”

We badly need a step change in efforts to eliminate violence against women. Two women are killed by their partner or their ex every week in England and Wales alone. According to the crime survey for England and Wales, in the past year 1.2 million women were victims of domestic violence. In Scotland last year, more than 58,000 incidents of domestic violence were reported to the police. Across the UK as a whole, the police recorded more than 87,500 rapes and more than 400,000 sexual assaults. Given that many—possibly most—incidents of sexual assault and rape go unreported, we must not underestimate the scale of the challenge we face.

We live in an environment where gender-based violence is so pervasive and normalised that we hardly even notice how much we put up with. Last week, here in Parliament, we heard harrowing accounts from the hon. Members for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson), for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) and for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), who so courageously spoke out about their own dreadful experiences. One in three women experience sexual assault and rape go unreported, we must not underestimate the scale of the challenge we face.

We live in an environment where gender-based violence is so pervasive and normalised that we hardly even notice how much we put up with. Last week, here in Parliament, we heard harrowing accounts from the hon. Members for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson), for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) and for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), who so courageously spoke out about their own dreadful experiences. One in three women experience domestic abuse or sexual violence in their lifetimes—and that figure is recognised as likely to be a conservative estimate.

Even those who avoid personal attack are living in a world saturated with images of glorified sexual violence, with a toxic public discourse in which boasting of sexual assault is reframed as locker room talk, women who are raped or assaulted are frequently shamed or blamed, and lives are blighted, and in some cases irreparably harmed. It affects us all. It restricts where we go, what we wear and what we dare to say out loud. In my view, we need to name violence against women for what it is: the most pervasive and systemic human rights abuse in
the world today, affecting women in every street in every village, town and city in every country around the world.

We need to understand that violence against women is grounded in and compounds gender inequality. Those of us who are committed to pushing the issue up the political agenda have our work cut out for us. Although domestic abuse and sexual violence primarily affect women, we should acknowledge that they also affect men, non-binary people and especially children—girls and boys.

We need to understand that violence against women is neither natural nor inevitable. We can prevent it and challenge it. We can hold the perpetrators to account.

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Dr Whiteford: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point. Many people are very shocked when they hear those statistics for the first time and hear that so much domestic abuse begins when women are probably at their most vulnerable—during pregnancy, when they are bringing new life into the world and yet do not have the protection they should expect from the fathers, often, of their children. He makes a very important point, and I am grateful to him for supporting the Bill.

I want to take a bit of time to set out why the Istanbul convention is so important, why it offers such a powerful vehicle for tackling gender-based violence and why the UK needs to prioritise its ratification. The treaty has global, national and local dimensions. In a globalising world, it recognises that gender-based violence often crosses state borders. States that ratify the convention commit to promoting and protecting the right of all their citizens to live free from violence in the public and private sphere, to working to end discrimination, to promoting equality between women and men, and to working within a co-ordinated, strategic, accountable and adequately resourced framework of policy and practice.

The convention is broad in scope. It covers aspects of criminal, civil and migration law. It sets out minimum standards for the protection of survivors and for access to services. It requires signatories to work to prevent violence and bring about attitudinal change. It explicitly addresses many of the most common manifestations of violence against women, including physical and psychological abuse, stalking, sexual violence, including rape, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and so-called honour crimes—that is not an exhaustive list.

It recognises the differentiated risks women face depending on their circumstances. Although we know that women from all backgrounds—all income groups, ages, ethnicities, cultures, religions and political perspectives—are affected by these types of violence, we also know that poorer women are more exposed to risk. We know that disabled women are more likely to experience abuse than able-bodied women and that refugees and asylum seekers are especially vulnerable. In this respect, we see gender inequality cutting across and compounding other forms of disadvantage, and the convention addresses those and other forms of discrimination in its articles.

Several weeks ago, I had a conversation with Dr Lisa Gormley of the London School of Economics, who is one of the UK’s leading experts on the Istanbul convention. She emphasised that the key bit of the convention is found in articles 7 to 11. That surprised me. At first glance, when we turn to them—well, let me read out some of the headings: “Comprehensive and co-ordinated policies”; “Financial resources”; “Non-governmental organisations and civil society”; “Co-ordinating body”; “Data collection and research”. That is pretty dry stuff—we might say it is quite technocratic—but it is the engine that will drive the machine. Those provisions will turn a good critical analysis of violence against women and a collection of useful case studies of policy initiatives into a strategic and dynamic vehicle for real and ongoing change. They will allow us to learn from others’ experience of what works and force us to think more strategically about how we provide support to women across different levels of government—local, national and international. Crucially, those provisions will improve the protection of funding for women’s refuges and helpline services at a time when austerity cuts to local government budgets and voluntary sector funding are placing such lifeline services in jeopardy.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I support the hon. Lady. She mentions local government. Women’s refuge shelters are under the hammer and being forced to close down in many places.

Dr Whiteford: The hon. Gentleman makes a vital point. One reason why it is important that we ratify the convention is that it gives protection in law to those services for the first time in a co-ordinated way, so that we do not have one local authority cutting services while another maintains them. The convention also forces Governments across the piece to work with one another and to think strategically about how to go about providing services in a way that is co-ordinated rather than piecemeal. That is one of the most important longer-term things that ratifying the convention will do. It will also make every level of government think twice before they pull the funding from the voluntary organisations delivering lifeline services to women living with domestic violence or trying to flee from it.

We are already seeing the impact of the Istanbul convention. The UK Government and many non-governmental actors from civil society were actively involved in the development of the convention and the negotiations surrounding it, and it is evident that that process has already been a powerful impetus to modernising domestic legislation in a number of relevant areas. It is important to acknowledge the steps the Government have taken in recent years to pave the way for ratification, most notably with new legislation on forced marriage,
modern slavery, stalking, female genital mutilation, so-called revenge porn, and controlling and coercive behaviour, all of which prepare the UK for compliance.

We have seen similar legislative progress in Scotland, most crucially with the Equally Safe strategy and the forthcoming domestic violence legislation, which is currently out for consultation. In that respect, the convention is already driving change, but we need to finish the job. Having signed the convention in June 2012, the UK has still to ratify the treaty.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for her Bill, which is doing a very important job this morning in this House. I wrote to the Government in January this year about the ratification of the Istanbul convention. The reply I received in February said:

“We will seek to legislate when the approach is agreed and Parliamentary time allows.”

Does she agree that that approach to this issue does not show nearly enough urgency?

Dr Whiteford: I agree entirely that this is an extremely urgent issue. Nobody can use the excuse of parliamentary time any more, given the way that business has been collapsing in recent weeks. There is plenty of parliamentary time; what we need is political will. I hope that my Bill will be a step along that road and give us the opportunity to examine this in more detail and to push the Government to follow up their words with actions. They have said consistently that they want and intend to ratify the convention, but we have reached a hiatus, the process has stalled and the convention has now been languishing on the backburner for over four and a half years, which is far longer than Council of Europe conventions usually take to ratify. The Bill is an attempt to shift the logjam and give the Government the impetus they need to take the final steps to bring the UK into compliance.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Lady on her Bill. This is a vital matter. What does she think is holding the Government back from ratifying the convention?

Dr Whiteford: I have some theories, and I hope to come to those in due course, but at the end of the day a lack of political will holds these things back. The fact that so many Members are here on the Friday before we break for Christmas shows that many people recognise how critical this is.

As Members will see, this is a short and straightforward Bill that would require the Government to provide a clear timetable for ratification within four weeks of Royal Assent and require the Home Secretary to come to Parliament annually to report on our compliance with the convention. This would afford Members across the House better opportunity to scrutinise the Government’s record and plans for tackling violence against women. Ratification needs to be more than a tick-box exercise. It is a challenge for us all, as legislators and policymakers, to make sure that it works in practice to improve women’s lives. Strengthening parliamentary accountability would also improve our compliance with article 70 of the convention.

I want to turn to those areas where the UK is not yet fully compliant with the convention. The main sticking point appears to be article 44, which makes provision for countries to establish jurisdiction over an offence committed by one of their nationals outwith their territory. I am told by learned friends that extraterritorial jurisdiction can be a tricky legal area for politicians and civil servants visibly blanch when those magic words are spoken—but the UK already exercises extraterritorial jurisdiction in relation to dozens of serious offences in a wide range of areas, including in several relevant to the convention, such as forced marriage, trafficking, female genital mutilation and sexual offences against children. There are still a number of offences, however, including rape, sexual assault and domestic abuse, where it does not yet apply and where compliance would require changes to domestic law.

Moreover, some of those offences relate to areas of devolved responsibility in Scotland and Northern Ireland, so UK Ministers would need to work with Ministers in Holyrood and Stormont to secure the necessary legislative changes in the Scottish Parliament and Northern Irish Assembly, or agree legislative consent motions. I am pleased to say that the Scottish Government have signalled their willingness to push this forward, and I have been heartened by the support for the convention and my Bill from Northern Irish MPs across the political spectrum.

I want us to be clear about the difference that ratification would make and why it matters. A few weeks ago, the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) raised in Prime Minister’s Question Time the case of a constituent of his who—it is alleged—was raped by another British national outside the UK. If we had already ratified the Istanbul convention and integrated the provisions in article 44 into domestic legislation, the authorities here could have investigated and prosecuted that crime, and crimes like it.

Another example is that the women’s organisation the Southall Black Sisters has been working tirelessly to highlight the circumstances surrounding the death of Seeta Kaur, a UK citizen whose family believe was the victim of a so-called honour killing in India. The UK already has extraterritorial jurisdiction over the crime of murder, but the contested circumstances of Seeta’s death have made it difficult for her family to get the police here involved, even though they claim there is evidence that a serious crime was planned in the UK. Again, ratification of the convention would strengthen the law to provide unambiguous protection for those at risk of honour-based violence.

The Istanbul convention would offer significantly enhanced protection to women who spend time working overseas and those who work for airlines or on cruise ships. Many women travel abroad in the course of their professional lives, but if, for example, a colleague sexually assaults or rapes them in a country where the law is weak, they may have little or no redress. Workplace harassment policies are not designed to deal with criminal violence, nor should they be. We need to give our police and our courts the authority to hold UK nationals and those who work for airlines or on cruise ships accountable to British law abroad that would constitute a serious crime at home.

We already exercise these powers in relation to child sex offences, but not sexual offences against adult women. We exercise extraterritorial jurisdiction in relation to terrorist offences, but not to those terrorised behind closed doors. It is important that we send a strong signal that crimes such as rape, sexual assault and domestic abuse committed by UK nationals will be
taken seriously wherever they occur in the world. The key point is that the very existence of extraterritorial jurisdiction and the possibility of sanction will act as a powerful deterrent and help to end the impunity with which some of the most violent perpetrators evade justice. These people should have nowhere to hide.

The Government need to take the Istanbul convention out of the bottom drawer, where it has been filed for far too long in a pile marked “too complicated, too difficult, too low a priority,” and we need to work together, across the House, across Departments and across the devolved Administrations to move things forward.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend on the Bill. Does she agree that it is important that the UK ratifies the convention and shows global leadership on this issue? We heard in Westminster Hall recently that in South Sudan and its capital, Juba, over 70% of the female population have been subject to sexual assault. It is used as a weapon of war. That is completely unacceptable, and it is vital that the UK shows global leadership by ratifying the convention.

Dr Whiteford: My hon. Friend’s point is well made. The shocking statistics from that part of the world remind us of just how serious this issue is globally. His substantial point about leadership is also right. If a Parliament such as this one, where the rule of law is well established and our legislative processes are robust, finds this too difficult, how on earth can we ask other countries that do not have the same traditions of governance to do it? We need to step up and show some leadership globally.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As with other private Member’s Bills, is it not also about the message we send out? The fact that this has languished for four and a half years sends out the message that women and violence against them are not important—and then we wonder why women do not report attacks or intimidation in their own home.

Dr Whiteford: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We know that these crimes are terribly under-reported. Some of the organisations that work with victims and survivors estimate that as many as 90% of the women who use their services have not reported the crimes to the police, so, yes, we need to let people know that it is okay to speak up, that it is safe to do so and that support will be available. Until we do that, people will not come forward in the numbers the problem demands.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): We do not have to look as far as Sudan for examples of countries that have not ratified, and do not intend to ratify, the convention. One example is Germany. Last new year’s eve, there was the most appalling violence against women, but Germany has not even signed, let alone ratified, the convention.

Dr Whiteford: I am really very surprised that the hon. Gentleman thinks we should follow the example of Germany on this issue.

I would like to thank sincerely hon. Members from all parties who have made the effort to be here today, giving up the last constituency Friday before Christmas and, in some cases, rearranging long-standing diary commitments. As well as Scottish National MPs, Labour, Tory, Liberal Democrat, Plaid Cymru, Social Democratic and Labour, Democratic Unionist, Green and independent MPs have signalled their support. In particular, I want to thank the hon. Members for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for their advice and help, as well as Ministers who have been willing to meet me for discussions ahead of the Bill. I am hopeful that a united voice from Parliament today can bring ratification significantly closer.

I want to acknowledge a number of women on whose expertise on the Istanbul convention I have relied in bringing forward this Bill. I have been lucky to have a formidably erudite team of advisers from all parts of the UK, and in no particular order I would like to thank Lisa Gormley, Marsha Scott, Hillary Fisher, Gemma Lindfield, Cris McCurley, Maria Bjarnadottir, Emma Ritch, Evelyn Fraser, Liz Law and Jackie Jones for all their assistance and invaluable insights. I want to thank my brilliant assistant Nathan Sparling who, in his own words, has been amazing.

I pay special tribute, too, to the women behind the IC Change campaign for their relentless determination to get the Istanbul convention on the statute book. They have been truly inspiring. Robyn Boosey, Rebecca Bunce and Rachel Nye run the IC Change campaign in their spare time on an entirely voluntary basis, co-ordinating with professional and non-professional women’s organisations and campaign groups all over the UK. They have been doing an incredible job, and I know they will not give up until they have achieved their goal.

Ratification of the Istanbul convention is not an end in itself; we need to see it as a platform for ongoing progress. Often the critics of international multilateral processes will point out that a treaty is just a piece of paper and that setting out rights and duties in international law does not necessarily give them effect—and, of course, that is sometimes demonstrably true. We must not let that happen here, because although the Istanbul convention is a solid foundation and a secure base camp, we still have a mountain to climb. We need to remember the scale of the problem and the magnitude of the task. We need to use this convention to measure progress and bank the gains. We need to use its robust monitoring, data collection and reporting mechanisms to drive sustained reductions in violence over the medium and longer term. The dynamic nature of the key articles of the Istanbul convention will be crucial to developing the policies and services that will deliver progress, along with the changes in attitudes and behaviour that will end the scourge of gender-based violence.

Lastly, I believe that ratification of the Istanbul convention is important because of its symbolism and the message it sends to women everywhere about our dignity, our right to equality and our right to live lives free of sexual and domestic violence. The powerful symbolism of the convention matters, because it reinforces the confidence of women in ourselves and in the moral force of our long struggle for equality. I believe very passionately that we can end violence against women;
Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on securing this very important debate. She has my absolute and full support.

The Istanbul convention is historic, as has been said. It is the first international treaty that legally defines violence against women: a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women. I believe that this is absolutely the right time for this Government to ratify the convention. It is overdue, but this is an historic time: our Prime Minister is a woman; our Home Secretary is a woman; and a woman is bringing this in this Bill. It is indeed a good time to bring this forward.

I applaud the Government for signing up to the convention four years ago. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), said this month that the Government are complying with every single aspect of the convention. I applaud the fact that this Government have extra-territorial jurisdiction over female genital mutilation and forced marriage, about which I have spoken previously.

Ratifying the convention is important for my constituents so that the Government are aligned with what is going on at the ground level in all our constituencies. Amazing work is being done in my Twickenham constituency, but it was only through my work as a local councillor and now an MP in the area that I realised how appalling the challenge is. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, this is a huge challenge for our society, and I know it is a huge challenge for Twickenham.

On average, the police are called out in my borough two to three times every night for domestic violence. A few months back, I spent a Saturday night/Sunday morning shift with the police, and even though I knew the statistics I was horrified by what I saw. That afternoon, I had been knocking on doors down one of our prettiest streets in Twickenham—I had spoken to many people that Saturday—yet that night and in the early hours of Sunday morning, I was in the police van after a serious incident of domestic violence. I did not know whether I had spoken that afternoon either to the victim or to somebody who had committed violence. There was absolutely no way I could have known that. I realised that, given that MPs tend to knock on doors on every street, we might be meeting someone who is either a victim or a perpetrator of this crime on every street.

I had a constituency meeting with police, charities and the Greater London Authority to talk about what we could do in our area. It was chilling to hear from one of the police officers when he said that in this borough “we are more unsafe in our own homes than we are on the streets”.

Dr Philippa Whitford: It is recognised that we are more likely to see women from poorer backgrounds captured in the data, but in the more middle-class and better-off circles of society is there not even greater pressure on women not to report? Working as a doctor, I met many women patients beaten below the neck, so that the injuries would not show. They were covered in bruises, yet they still came out with the “It’s my fault; I should not have done this or that” type of comment. We must not be misled by the data into thinking that this is not an issue among the better-off.

Dr Mathias: I think the data are likely to show that this is happening in every country, every street and in every type of household. My concern for London is that we are not aware of it going on much in our neighbours’ homes. What I find in Twickenham is that the good Samaritans are everywhere. If there has been an incident—thankfully a very rare incident—of violence on the street, about half a dozen people will be there immediately. If somebody has suffered a fall or a seizure or a heart attack on Twickenham’s streets—it does not happen that often—half a dozen people will be there immediately again. When that happens, somebody will contact me the next day—they know how to track me down—and they will ask me, “How is that person? Are they all right?”

We therefore know that in our communities the good Samaritans are looking out for each other, but there are never half a dozen good Samaritans when domestic violence happens in people’s homes. We need people to know what is going on, and all over the UK there is a 24-hour helpline, 0808 2000 247. We have a brilliant one-stop shop in my borough. People are reaching out, but what I am saying is that to ratify the convention we need to align with what is going on in our constituencies at ground level.

About 60 years ago, about 20,000 women marched in Pretoria, using that wonderful phrase, “Wathint’ Abafazi Wathint’ Imbokodo”—I hope I can be forgiven my bad pronunciation—“You strike a woman, you strike a rock”. I believe that this convention is our equivalent of saying precisely that. This is the time; I support the Bill.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, the Culture Secretary agreed to come back to the Dispatch Box if a further security breach were to be revealed at the national lottery. In the last few minutes, the Gambling Commission has published a document saying that it was “more likely than not that a fraudulent prize claim had been made and paid out.”

There is potentially a great lotto robbery. Camelot has been fined £3 million and has been found to be in breach of three parts of its licence. Have you had a request, Mr Speaker, from a Minister to make an urgent statement to the House, so that the Department can guarantee to millions of lottery players in the UK that the game is safe?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer to him is no: I have received no indication that a Minister has any plan to come to the Chamber today. But I have known the hon. Gentleman a long time, and he is nothing if not a persistent woodpecker—that is a compliment—so my very strong hunch is that he will be in his place on Monday, using such devices as are available to him to try to secure the presence of a Minister to answer on
this important matter. Meanwhile, I hope the hon. Gentleman has an enjoyable, and moderately restful, weekend.

10.10 am

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I want to say a huge thank you to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) for introducing this Bill. Four years after the signing of the Istanbul convention we are here today to try to push the Government to ratify. That is long overdue.

I want to say, too—I intend to say a few uncharacteristic things—that I know how much the Government care about this issue. Long before I was elected to this place I worked very closely with Home Office officials, some of whom I know are here today. I worked with the Home Office under the then Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, for years, and I never saw anything that led me to believe they had anything but commitment to improving legislation in the area of domestic violence and sexual violence. In practical terms, when things had to be delivered—that costs money and falls under the Department for Communities and Local Government’s auspices—things did tend to break down. But in legislative terms, the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the measures against coercive control and other steps let me know that there was that commitment, regardless of all the things that divide us—and, my gosh, I could talk out a debate on how many things divide us, but I like to sleep at night and was raised properly.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): May I also put on record my support for this Bill, and for what the hon. Lady is saying? Does she agree that it is not enough just to pass legislation? We must also enforce it, which has been somewhat lacking over the last few years?

Jess Phillips: I entirely agree. We have to do something about this building is paved with great intentions and great legislation—we have some of the best legislation on domestic violence in the world—but then open an enormous door into an empty room. It is very difficult for our police forces to enforce certain issues. That is not because they do not have the legislative framework; it because of a whole series of other reasons.

We all have to work together, a bit like yesterday in the social care statement, in every conversation in this place about the NHS. We need to work together to make this happen. I hope those on the Conservative Benches do not take offence at what I am about to say, but in a spirit of total pragmatism I would dance with the devil to make women and children safer; I will do anything.

I came to this place to bang my fists on this side of the table, because I got sick of banging them on the other side. I know the Government care about this, and I know that if they were perhaps not distracted by other things the ratification of the Istanbul convention would probably have easily passed. I say to those on the Conservative Benches that the stumbling blocks over compulsory personal, social, health and economic education and talking to young people about consent and the ratification of the Istanbul convention are a real threat to what is not a bad record in this area; it is a pretty good record. But the record on the allocation of funding needs a lot of work—all the refuges in my constituency are threatened at present.

If I was not here and had not won my seat, I would today be surrounded by piles and piles of presents given by the local community to the refuge. My desk used to become like a fort, and we would have to organise parties to get the presents wrapped, in order to give out thousands and thousands of gifts to the women and children who lived in the refuge every year. We would always throw a party. It might not seem like it to those who have never worked in the field, but it was one of the happiest times of the year. One of the reasons it was so happy was that everybody—the chief executive of the organisation, the commissioner from the council, the cleaner in the refuge, the children in the refuge—rolled up their sleeves to achieve something together. We would all make the sausage rolls, and the women would be running in and out of their flats with plates of different food, so that we could all spend Christmas together knowing that there is a huge amount of solidarity in the world for victims of domestic violence.

One of the main underpinnings of the Istanbul convention is the idea that we all work together—that we need multiple agencies genuinely working together across the world to improve things for victims of domestic violence.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jess Phillips: No. That was worth thinking about for a moment, but I am sure the hon. Gentleman is going to get his say.

I want to say some thank yous to the people who have meant that we are here today. Our colleagues from Scotland have done a fantastic job and, as usual, are all sat in the Chamber now en masse. I want again to say perhaps an uncharacteristic thank you to the Leader of the Opposition who has shown his commitment and worked with us to make sure the Labour party today will show its commitment for this, and specifically to Amy Watson in his office; it is always an exciting time in politics when we just spend all day on the phone ringing round to get people to a place. I also thank the unions who have been involved in lobbying Members to be here today, including UNISON, and the Muslim Council of Britain. I got lots of lobby emails; all of that is down to my family live by. We get his say.

All of us will wake up on Christmas morning stressed out. It is the only day when it is acceptable to drink from 6 am. On holiday, it is 12 o’clock, on Christmas day it is 6 o’clock; that is the rule my family live by. We will all be stressed and we will be wondering whether we have bought the right presents, and one of them will have gone missing. Things will be more stressful, especially for the womenfolk of this world, than they are particularly festive or cheerful, because things are tense on Christmas day.
I ask everybody in here to imagine that that tension is not just because we are not sure whether we have got the rights gifts for our auntie or whether everyone will have a cause at the private Member's Table tomorrow to ensure life like it did last year. Some people wake up on Christmas day and they will try not to say anything wrong; they will try not to put a foot wrong. They will make sure everything is perfect; they will have risk-assessed every single step they take throughout the day because on just this one day their children deserve not to have the monster that lives in their home erupt in their faces. On just this one day, their children deserve to have the peaceful day that all our children take for granted. For those people, all the stresses that we feel will be terror and control over everything they say and do in order to keep things safe. Ratifying this convention and sending them a message today would be the greatest gift that we could offer.

10.20 am

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to follow someone whom I am tempted to call my hon. Friend, but I know that I am not supposed to, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) speaks with such passion and expertise in the area of domestic violence. I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on bringing forward this important Bill. I had put today’s date in my diary as a “PMB” day because my private Member’s Bill is third on the list. I hope to see the same number of people here to support mine, but we will see how the day goes.

The Bill represents an historic opportunity to tackle domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. It is a shame that Parliament was not sitting last Friday, which was the penultimate day of 16 days of activism following the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. That might have been more appropriate, but events are determined by the days on which the House sits. It is shocking in this day and age that on average two women are killed by their partner or ex-partner every week in England and Wales and that 27.1% of women have experienced abuse since the age of 16. Last year, an estimated 4.5 million females aged between 16 and 59 were victims of domestic abuse.

Preparing my speech for today made me reflect, and I recalled the time when, as a child, my sister and I were aged between 16 and 59 were victims of domestic abuse. It is an important issue that sadly affects so many women, and one could ask why we need a private Member’s Bill to do something about it. We know that the Government have already committed to ratifying the convention and have provided many examples of the work that they are doing to meet and go beyond its requirements, but this is an historic day and an important private Member’s Bill, which provides a chance for everyone in the House to come together and show our support for an important issue.

The best way to end violence against women is to prevent it from happening in the first place. That means changing prejudices, attitudes and gender stereotypes through the further training of professionals and the use of NGOs to help people recognise and challenge different forms of violence and to prevent victimisation. I emphasise the need for co-operation between agencies. We must ensure that children are taught about equality at an early age and that intervention and treatment programmes are working as well as they possibly can. I recall visiting a women’s refuge in the north-east several years ago. I was humbled to meet the women and children there, and I gained a deeper understanding of the fact that domestic violence has no social boundaries or age limits. Sadly, it cuts across all classes and all areas of society.

The women and girls who have been failed by preventative measures and have become victims of violence must be offered the best possible protection and support. They need support and understanding from Government agencies, the police, and health services, many of which already do terrific work. Specific measures include ensuring...
that victims have access to adequate information in a language that they can understand, that shelters are established with an adequate geographical distribution, and that easily accessible rape crisis and sexual violence referral centres are available to those who need them.

Turning to the prosecution of perpetrators, one of the convention’s biggest achievements is the range of measures, procedures and best practices for investigating and prosecuting violence against women. The convention ensures that victims must be protected at all stages of an investigation whether through emergency barring orders, whereby the police can remove a perpetrator of domestic violence from their home, or restraining and protection orders. Such orders must be available for immediate protection, allowed during subsequent legal proceedings and, possibly most importantly, issued without prejudicing the defendant’s right to a fair trial.

The issue is not confined to the UK or Europe, so I want to discuss violence against women and girls abroad. Through my work on the International Development Committee and as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for sustainable development goals, I have seen and heard about examples of violence against women and girls throughout the world. Sexual violence is one characteristic of the ongoing insurgency in north-east Nigeria. Earlier in the year, along with my International Development Committee colleague, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—I hope I have pronounced that correctly—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear”]—I met representatives from “Bring Back Our Girls” campaign at the Unity Fountain in Abuja. They campaign on and highlight the issues relating to the missing Chibok girls. It is now 978 days since they were abducted and 196 of them remain missing. This campaign cannot be pushed to the sidelines, and this event was really moving. It was one of the memorable parts of that visit earlier in the year, albeit for sad reasons.

In 2014, the then Foreign Secretary, Lord Hague of Richmond, as he is now, hosted the first global summit to end sexual violence in conflict, along with the UN special envoy for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. It took place here in the UK and was the largest gathering ever brought together on the subject, with 1,700 delegates and 123 country delegations, including 79 Ministers. The summit agreed practical steps to tackle impunity for the use of rape as a weapon of war and to begin to change global attitudes to these crimes. As I said earlier, changing attitudes to these crimes and towards equality in general must surely be the best way of ending violence against women.

Similarly, in 2005 the UK successfully advocated for a stand-alone goal on gender equality as part of the sustainable development goals and the establishment of dedicated targets within the goals for all countries on ending all forms of violence against women and girls. It is only with measures such as these that we can hope to bring an end to the suffering of women worldwide.

It is also only fair to draw attention to some of the good work that the Government and the Department for International Development are doing throughout the world to help end violence against women and girls. DFID is running a number of successful programmes to tackle FGM, helping 15 countries to have a policy framework or action plan to end it. The Secretary of State for International Development has demonstrated her commitment to this important work recently, committing £2.75 million to the UN trust fund to end violence against women, supporting organisations across the world to tackle gender-based violence. That takes the UK’s total contribution to the fund to £11 million. The SDGs are global—they are universal—and it is right and proper that we recognise them today in this important debate. We must recognise that there is still a long way to go, but a lot of work has already been done on goal 5, which is to:

“Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”.

Let me come back to what is happening in the UK and the reason we are all here today. I am conscious that I am indulging your time, Mr Deputy Speaker—I am looking at the clock as I speak. Last year, there were more than 100,000 prosecutions for domestic abuse. The fact that more victims are having the confidence to come forward and report violence shows that we are moving in the right direction, but there is always more we can do, and ratifying the Istanbul convention is one way of achieving that. I end by recognising the work the Government have done already in line with the Istanbul convention, and they should be applauded. I will be supporting the Bill today, to help ensure that violence against a woman simply because she is a woman becomes a thing of the past.
comments that are made online, all of us, but especially the men among us, have an important role to play—we need to challenge the attitudes of others when we see that type of abuse taking place online. At this point, I must give particular praise to my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who is doing a huge amount of work on tackling this, via a number of different avenues, including by chairing the all-party group on the white ribbon campaign. I am sure we are going to hear from him shortly, but I cannot let this sitting pass without putting on the record my feelings of support, and I am sure those of my colleagues, for the work that he is doing.

We all have such an important role to play. We have an opportunity to be leaders in our own communities, to change attitudes, to take that stand and drive change for the best. If we can influence young people today and change their attitudes before it is too late, we can really get that shift change in attitude that will eventually see us taking those steps to eradicate violence against women. There is no need for any violence against women to take place and we need to do everything we can to stamp it out, whether we are talking about violence or simply about an offensive comment online. All of us have a responsibility to make a stand and do what we can to make sure that we make these changes. A fantastic first step in doing that will be to support the Bill today.

10.37 am

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I commend the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) for introducing the Bill and for the typically excellent speech she made? She is one of the best performers in the House of Commons and she further enhanced her reputation with her speech today.

This is a Bill to:

“Require the United Kingdom to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention); and for connected purposes.”

I do not expect to find much support in this House for some of what I want to put on the record today—that is normal, whether we are talking about violence or simply about an offensive comment online. We have only to look at the EU referendum to see how out of touch this House is with majority opinion across the country.

This is a typical Friday Bill. It comes with a worthy sentiment; who could possibly be against trying to stop violence against women? The answer is nobody. I am not aware of anybody who wants to argue that people should be violent towards women and girls—of course they should not. The argument seems to be that, as long as someone supports the premise in the Bill’s title of “combating violence against women”, they must support the Bill, and that someone who opposes the Bill must be in favour of violence against women and children. That is the level of debate I would expect from the morons on Twitter, but I still live in hope that we might have better-quality debate than that in this House, although in my experience it does not actually get much better normally. I live in hope and will try again to have a sensible debate about these matters rather than the level of debate that we get used to on social media. I have a fundamental objection to the whole premise that we need to deal only with violence against women.

Jess Phillips: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: Erm, no! It was worth thinking about for a few seconds. If the hon. Lady comes back to me later, I may well oblige her—I could not resist that temptation.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: Yes, I will.

Sarah Champion: I really appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s tone and the fact that he recognises the seriousness of this matter. I must point out to him that there are two parts to the Bill: combating violence against women and domestic violence. It does not say whether the domestic violence is against men, women or children.

Philip Davies: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting that, and I will come on to that. As she rightly said, and as I tried to illustrate at the start of my contribution, there are two separate elements to this Bill, and I want to do justice to both of them if I may.

To be honest, I cannot believe that this needs saying, but it is so discriminatory and sexist to say that we should be focusing only on violence against women. If this was the other way around, there would be an absolute outcry from people in this House, and rightly so. I do not take the view that violence against women and girls is somehow worse than violence against men and boys. As far as I am concerned, all violence is unacceptable, and all violence against the person should be punished by law. Both men and women are victims and both are perpetrators of these crimes. I believe in true equality, and want people to be treated equally whether they are a victim or a perpetrator of crime.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a characteristically passionate speech, but does he not want to acknowledge that, over the past 20 years, half of the victims of murder who were women were killed by family members, and only 6% of males who have been murdered were killed by family members? That is quite a significant discrepancy and it needs to be acknowledged in this House.

Philip Davies: I will come on to the discrepancy between the levels of violence against men and women in due course, because it is worth highlighting.

I believe in true equality and want people to be treated equally. At the moment, whether people like it or not, men are treated more harshly than women in the criminal justice system—that is certainly the case when it comes to sentencing. I know that that is an inconvenient truth for many people, but it is the truth nevertheless. On top of that—this is where it relates to my hon. Friend’s point—all the evidence shows that men are more likely to be a victim of violent crime than women in this country.

Jess Phillips: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his graciousness—genuinely. When he started speaking, he said that a Member saying that they do not support this Bill does not mean that they support violence against women. He is absolutely right to say that it is not a
People really believe in equality in this House, let us go good now trying to redraw the nature of the debate, against women. That is all we have heard so far. It is no four speeches so far, and I think I have heard only one bring back a Bill that all of us can support. We have had I have said, we can go back to the drawing board and with him.

Philip Davies: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady. Perhaps then we can go back to the drawing board and make it clear that we want to introduce a Bill that targets men and women alike. If we do that, I would be delighted that both of us would be able to support it.

Dr Whiteford: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will read a bit from the Istanbul convention, to which I alluded in my speech. It says that “measures to protect the rights of victims, shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status.”

That is article 4, clause 3, of the Istanbul convention.

Philip Davies: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady. As I have said, we can go back to the drawing board and bring back a Bill that all of us can support. We have had four speeches so far, and I think I have heard only one passing reference to men. The whole thrust of this debate and argument, and the whole point of this Bill today, is simply about the unacceptability of violence against women. That is all we have heard so far. It is no good now trying to redraw the nature of the debate, because I am raising the point about true equality. If people really believe in equality in this House, let us go back to the drawing board and bring back a Bill that makes that clear.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Although it is true that article 4, which has just been quoted by the promoter of this Bill, says what she says it says, article 2 is the relevant article, because it sets out the scope of the convention. Paragraph 1 of article 2 quite clearly states: “This Convention shall apply to all forms of violence against women.”

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will also come on to article 1, which makes it clear that discrimination against men is absolutely fine as far as the convention is concerned. It flies in the face of the impression that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan wants to give. There is an easy way to deal with this, as we all seem to be in agreement: we can go back to the drawing board and bring forward a Bill on which we can all agree.

Dr Mathias: In view of the fact that the Government have signalled that they will ratify this convention, is my hon. Friend saying that he does not want the Government to ratify it?

Philip Davies: I am against ratifying it, and I am trying to set out my reasons for my view. I want the Government to ratify something that targets all violence. During the course of my speech, I will test out Members’ commitment to stamping out violence—whether it be by men or women.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Is my hon. Friend arguing that there is no point in doing something that is a good thing, unless it solves all the problems of the world?

Philip Davies: If my hon. Friend is happy for a convention to make it explicitly clear that it is fine to discriminate against men—[Interruption.] I know that a lot of people are up in arms. I suspect that most of them have not even bothered to read all of the articles in the convention. If they want to, off the cuff, repeat to me article 1 of the convention in full—[Interruption.] No, I did not think that they could. They are just up in arms because of what I said at the start of my speech. They think, “It seems like a worthy sentiment, so we must support a worthy sentiment.” They have no substance for their view, but I am sure that if they want to catch your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker, and explain all the nuances of the different articles of this convention, you will humour them. I suspect that there is not much substance behind all the hollering, as usual, from our Scottish National party colleagues. I will try to help out my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) by explaining why I think that this convention should not be ratified. I am trying to make it clear that I believe in true equality rather than in this kind of equality that applies only to one gender.

My premise is that all the evidence shows that men are more likely to be victims of violent crime in this country than women.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that two women a week are killed. I do not know whether he has ever gone to a funeral of a woman who has died and seen the children there. I can assure him that I have, and it is a very uncomfortable experience.

Philip Davies: There are also funerals of men who have died. I am sure that that is just as uncomfortable an experience for their children. I am very sad that the hon. Lady does not recognise that, when a father dies, it is just as upsetting for the children as when a mother dies. I take issue with that premise.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): When the hon. Gentleman gives that crime statistic, is he trying to say that all those men have been made victims of crime because they are men? This Bill is about combating violence against women that is committed precisely because they are women and girls. That is not the case with the vast majority of crimes that he is talking about in those statistics.

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman is going down an interesting route, as he is basically saying that, no matter the injuries a person sustains in a violent attack, all we should be concerned about is the motivation. If the motivation is not what the hon. Gentleman thinks—[Interruption.] That is fair enough. It seems to me, though, that if somebody comes up to a person because they hate them and beats them to a pulp, the nuance of why they hate that person is less important than the
scale of the injuries they suffer and the need for the person who perpetrated the crime to be punished. The hon. Gentleman clearly has a different opinion on that. I am more interested in the violence and the punishment of the perpetrator.

Mr Chope: In the preamble to the convention there is a reference to the Geneva convention of 1949, which is gender-neutral despite the fact that most of the victims of breaches of the Geneva convention are men.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly valid point. If we follow the logic of today’s debate, the Geneva convention should have applied only to men, as they were much more likely to be subjected to what it was intended to cover. I think that that would be nonsense, and I suspect that my hon. Friend and most people here think that it would be nonsense too, but it is amazing that when it falls on the other side, everyone is silent. That is the hypocrisy I want to expose today and I am going to press on and expose it.

To highlight the fact that men are more likely to be the victims of violent crime, I will quote the recent statistics from the Ministry of Justice on the representation of females and males in the criminal justice system. They confirm that men are nearly twice as likely to be the victim of violent crime than women. According to the crime survey of England and Wales, 1.3% of women interviewed reported being victims of violence compared with 2.4% of men. My point also applies to children. Again according to the crime survey for England and Wales, in 2015-16 a smaller proportion of girls than boys reported being victims of violence—4.2% of girls versus 7.7% of boys.

It is not just with violence generally that men do worse than women. When it comes to the most serious cases, according to the crime survey for England and Wales, in 2015-16 women accounted for 36% of recorded homicide victims while men were victims in 64% of cases. Clearly, on every possible level of crime, a man is more likely to be the victim than a woman.

Although we have not heard much, if anything, about this today, men are also victims of domestic violence. It is not true that domestic violence incidents involving a woman is the victim, which is absolutely outrageous, but in a third of cases the victim is a man. It may well be that some people in this House think we should only be concerned about the two thirds who are women, but I do not. We should be concerned about all victims of domestic violence equally. They are all victims of domestic violence and we should consider them equally whenever we consider a response to it, not just the two thirds who happen to be women.

According to the Office for National Statistics report “Focus on Violent Crime and Sexual Offences”, which relates to the year ending March 2015 and which was released in February, the crime survey of England and Wales estimates that 8.2% of women and 4% of men reported experiencing any type of domestic abuse in the last year—that is all forms of abuse. That is equivalent to an estimated 1.3 million female victims and 600,000 male victims, all of whom, in my opinion, equally deserve our support. The ONS also confirms that 6.5% of women and 2.8% of men reported having experienced any type of partner abuse in the last year, equivalent to an estimated 1.1 million female victims and 500,000 male victims.

The Bill refers to preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Although the first part is relatively clear, the second bit, about domestic violence, is not so clear, because of the definition of domestic violence. Our definition of it includes non-violent components, so we need to be very careful when bandying around figures about domestic violence. That is inevitably the problem with a wide definition. It has the word “violence” in the title, and people then understandably assume it relates to physical violence, but that is not always necessarily the case and that can be quite confusing. We must also remember that domestic incidents include people in relationships, as well as those in family and other relationships that could be considered domestic in nature. What I am trying to say is that the notion that in every case of domestic violence or abuse the perpetrator is a big, burly wife-beater is just that—a notion, not fact.

I asked the House of Commons Library for some information on what is known as the Istanbul convention, which this Bill seeks to ratify. The Library said that it is a Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. It was adopted by the Council of Europe on 27 April 2011, was open for signature on 11 May 2011 at the 121st session of the Committee of Ministers in Istanbul, and entered into force on 1 August 2014. The UK signed the convention on 8 June 2012, but has not yet ratified it. Some countries have signed the convention, like the UK, and some have signed it and ratified it as well. I will not go through all the countries and give their positions on it, although it is very illuminating and relevant to the debate, but I do not want to test the patience of the House.

Some countries have signed the convention but not ratified it, like us. Sudan was mentioned as an illustration earlier. As my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) rightly highlighted, Germany has not ratified it. Nor has Iceland, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Croatia and Cyprus. They are all members of the European Union, which is apparently such a fine institution that SNP Members are desperate for us to remain part of it, yet their wonderful partner countries have not bothered to ratify the convention either. There was no mention of that, strangely, in the speech made by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan. It is particularly interesting to note that Ireland only signed the convention on 5 November 2015, and has also not ratified it. Perhaps the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) might want to have a word with his friends in the Irish Republic to ask why they have not ratified it.

SNP Members were up in arms earlier about something that they never bothered to read and that they knew nothing about, but I will help them out, as I can tell them what article 1 says. It sets out five purposes, and the first is to “protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence”.

The second is to “contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and promote substantive equality between women and men, including by empowering women”.

The third is to “design a comprehensive framework, policies and measures for the protection of and assistance to all victims of violence against women and domestic violence”.

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The third is to “design a comprehensive framework, policies and measures for the protection of and assistance to all victims of violence against women and domestic violence”.
The fourth is to
“promote international co-operation with a view to eliminating
violence against women and domestic violence”,
and the fifth is to
“provide support and assistance to organisations and law enforcement
agencies to effectively co-operate in order to adopt an integrated
approach to eliminating violence against women and domestic
violence”.

Let us consider the first point. Of course we are all united in our opposition to any violence against women and girls. I will repeat that, Mr Deputy Speaker, if you do not mind, because I want to make it clear so that nobody misunderstands the terms of this debate. We are all united in our opposition to any violence against women and girls. I would be astounded if any of us were not. I pride myself on being one of the most hard-line Members on matters of law and order and sentencing, and I always find it rather strange that those who speak passionately about how we should have zero sentencing, and I always find it rather strange that those who speak passionately about how we should have zero tolerance of violence against women and girls and violence against people—which I agree with—are often the same people who then argue that the perpetrators of violence should do anything but be sent to prison.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman has helpfully laid out the objectives of the Istanbul convention. Can he explain precisely what he sees as the downside of ratifying the convention, given all that it could do to achieve much greater focus and energy in the prevention of violence against women and girls, and for all those—whether male or female—who will be victims, particularly given the scale and nature of domestic violence?

Philip Davies: My hope is that, by the time I have finished speaking, the hon. Lady will be much wiser about why I wholly oppose the Bill.

Mr Chope: May I suggest one answer to the hon. Lady’s intervention? Our legislation in this country has a much broader definition of domestic violence than the one in the convention.

Philip Davies: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he makes a good point. As I made clear, our definition of domestic violence is very different from that used in most other countries. However, there are other reasons, which I will come to, and article 1 contains something I fundamentally disagree with.

We are in the ridiculous situation where 66% of men convicted at Crown Court in England and Wales of violence against the person are sent to prison, compared with 37% of women. If we really want to send a message—this is a message I heard a number of Opposition Members say that that was the purpose of the Bill—of zero tolerance of violence against the person, the first thing, and perhaps the main thing or even the only thing, we should do is press for much tougher sentences for people who are found guilty. One way to prevent and eliminate violence is to send people to prison for longer, because while they are in prison, they cannot perpetrate any violence against anybody in their households, or anywhere else for that matter.

The Labour party, which is apparently so concerned about violence against women and girls, actually introduced a law in a previous Parliament whereby somebody who is sent to prison for committing violence against a woman or a girl has, by law, to be released halfway through their prison sentence, whether or not it is considered that they will go straight back into the household they came from and commit the same crime again. By the law of the land, those people have to be released halfway through their sentence. The last Labour Government introduced that, so it is no good Labour Members coming here today and saying how committed they are to stopping violence against women and girls, when they are the ones who are responsible for these people being let back out on to the streets and back into their houses much sooner than the courts originally intended.

If people want to do something worth while to prevent violence against women and girls and against other people, let us all press for stronger prison sentences. Let us all press for people to spend more of their sentence in prison, rather than being released out on licence. How many people are up for that in the House today? They all go amazingly quiet, because when it comes down to it, they want to huff and puff about being tough on violence against women and girls. When it comes down to the actual thing that most of our constituents would recognise as being tough on violence against women and girls—tougher prison sentences—Opposition Members run away, because they do not like people being sent to prison.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is making a very valid point. Does he not feel that there may be some correlation between the fact that the figures for violent crime are increasing and the fact that, as he has just pointed out, criminals know they will be let out halfway through their sentence?

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is not rocket science: the more criminals who are in prison, the fewer criminals are out on the street committing crimes. That is not really a massively difficult concept to grasp, although Opposition Members appear to be struggling with it. It is not that difficult to understand that if the people who commit these crimes are in prison, they cannot be committing these crimes. My hon. Friend must therefore surely be right in his suspicion.

The convention does not just cover violence, as article 1b mentions, and that is one of the reasons why I have a fundamental problem with the convention. Article 1b wants “the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women”, but I do not see how introducing a specific duty to eliminate all forms of discrimination against just women is not discriminatory in itself—I sometimes wish people could see the irony of their proposals. Surely, we should want to eliminate all forms of discrimination—full stop. Article 1b is, in effect, saying that discrimination against a man is okay because all we want to do is end discrimination against women. Well, it is not okay; no discrimination is okay. If this convention said, “Actually, what we want to do is end all forms of discrimination—full stop,” I would be the first to support it, but it does not say that. It talks about discrimination against women.
only. Surely, Members cannot support that form of discrimination. It flies in the face of everything we are supposed to believe in if we believe in true equality.

Then we have the phrase “including by empowering women”. This is obviously a legal document, and I am not entirely sure what the legal definition of that is supposed to be. We have some very respected people of the law in the Chamber today, and they may be able to help us out with the legal definition. I genuinely do not know, and I will bow to other people’s superior knowledge.

The English dictionary definition of empowering is “approving having qualities that give a person or a group of people the means to take more control of their lives and become stronger and more independent”, and we are all in favour of that I would like to think.

Most concerning to me, however, is the fact that this whole strategy seems to be based on the premise that all this violence against women is committed by men. Why else would it link discrimination, stereotyping and violence? That certainly seems to be the thought of many of the people who are supporting the convention and the Bill. The impression people might be under is that the perpetrators of all these crimes against women are men. Indeed, on the website of one of the campaigns endorsing the Bill, women were holding up placards with the slogan:

“Together we can end male violence against women”.

So it would seem that they are not interested in ending all violence, regardless of whether the victim is male or female, or even in ending all violence against women.

Despite what people want to believe, violence against women is not caused only by men. Indeed, there is no evidence to support that underlying assumption. A letter I received from the Crown Prosecution Service said:

“We are unable to provide information on your specific requests of ‘the sex of both the defendant and the victim’... This is because we record the sex of the defendant and victim as separate statistics rather than as a joined statistic.”

So today’s Bill is based on an assumption that can quickly be proved wrong. We only have to look at the individual cases that come to our courts to see that there are plenty where violence has been committed by a female offender against a female victim. Let me just give a flavour of those cases.

How about the case of Samira Lupidi, who stabbed her two young daughters to death in a refuge in November last year? Lupidi had been placed in a refuge with the girls after she called the police to their house, claiming her partner had been violent. Speaking about Lupidi’s relationship with the father, the judge said:

“You reacted to this very difficult situation by saying ‘If I cannot have them’—

“‘neither can he’... This is a crime which speaks of rage and I sentence you on the basis that you killed them in anger and out of a desire for revenge.”

A jury of six men and six women found her guilty of murder after only 90 minutes’ deliberation.

What about the case of Sadie Morris, a female paedophile who was sentenced to five years in jail after photographing herself abusing a three-year-old girl? The offences took place between 1 and 31 July 2013, with photographs involving one category A image—the most serious level—and one category B and one category C image. What about the case of a Romanian sex gang led by women who trafficked vulnerable women into Britain and forced them into prostitution? The gang raked in more than £15,000 a month and forced the prostitutes to deposit the cash across 14 separate bank accounts.

Ending male violence against women would not have prevented any of these cases, as the offenders were also female. Crime does not discriminate. We have to get real: instead of speaking of female victims of male perpetrators, we should speak of all victims, regardless of sex, and all offenders, regardless of sex. Why do so many Members find that so difficult to do?

There are many female perpetrators of violence against both men and women, according to official Ministry of Justice figures. Its report, “Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2015”, says that violence against the person and theft were consistently the two offence groups with the highest number of arrests for both females and males. In fact, violence against the person accounted for 34% of all male arrests and 36% of all female arrests in the criminal justice system—we have not heard any of that in the speeches so far—while theft offences made up 21% of male arrests and 26% of female arrests.

Again, this is not restricted to women but also applies to girls. In 2015-16, violence against the person was the most common offence group for which juvenile females—10 to 17-year-olds—were arrested. In fact, 40% of arrests of girls aged 10 to 17 were for violence against the person. It is no good people shaking their heads; these are the facts—the official statistics—although they might be inconvenient. I am not surprised that Opposition Members have not heard about it; we never hear any of this in this place because we are so blinkered in only wanting to look one dimensionally at all these issues. I am not surprised that it has come as a shock to Opposition Members.

This is backed up by reports of cases such as that of Katie Neild, a 27-year-old mother of two who was rushed to hospital after a woman bit her and ripped a chunk out of her face, which left the victim with permanent scarring, even after an emergency skin graft. A case heard at my local court, Bradford Crown court, was that of a female who burgled a 79-year-old woman’s house in August last year. In her defence, the defendant’s barrister claimed that she would be extremely vulnerable in prison with a baby due in less than three months, despite her not being pregnant at the time of the burglary. However, Judge Thomas at Bradford Crown court—a fine man—said that his duty was to the pensioner whose life was so significantly affected that she had not left her home since.

This just gives a flavour of the vast array of cases where female offenders target female victims. The discriminatory underlay of this Bill is pointless and wrong, because not all victims are female and not all offenders are male. We should be bringing forward gender-neutral legislation that seeks to help all victims of crime—men and women—and to punish all offenders, men and women. Even in cases where people may assume that all violence is male on female, such as domestic violence, this is not so.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend has been referring to statistics from the United Kingdom. He may be aware of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights,
which issued a very big report on violence against women—an EU-wide survey—in which it found that 11% of non-heterosexual women in Europe have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of other women.

**Philip Davies:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for alerting me to that fact, of which I was unaware. I was just coming on to that point, because it seems that the figures are worse than that in the United Kingdom.

**Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire)(Con):** Will my hon. Friend clarify something? Is he saying that if this Bill were gender-neutral, he would support it?

**Philip Davies:** Yes, I am very much saying that—that is the thrust of my point. I absolutely would support the Bill if it were gender-neutral, but it clearly is not, and we need only read the convention to see that fact and to have heard the speeches we have heard so far today to realise that it has nothing to do with gender neutrality.

In 2008, Stonewall found that one in four lesbian and bisexual women have experienced domestic violence in a relationship, with 49.3% of bisexual women experiencing severe physical intimate violence. On abuse during childhood, the recent MOJ report, "Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2015", notes:

"The perpetrator of physical abuse against females was almost as equally likely to be the mother as the father (33% and 36% respectively)."

This is not as clear-cut as some Members would want us to believe, but the Bill supports the narrative that they want to keep talking about. What they say bears no relation to the facts, but it very much helps a narrative that they want people to take away. At some point, some of us have got to say, "No, we are not prepared to allow these distortions to continue. We are going to argue what the actual facts are, not what people would want the facts to be."

If people do not want to listen to me—which I understand that they often do not, because I say things that they do not want to hear—perhaps they might have more sympathy for a marvellous lady called Erin Pizzey. In 1971, Erin Pizzey opened the world’s first women’s refuge in Chiswick specifically dealing with all victims of domestic violence. Perhaps because of her background, she has the credentials, which I am not afforded the luxury of being granted, to be given a hearing. She went to the United States at the invitation of the US Government and embarked on a Salvation Army-sponsored tour of 21 cities to help set up shelters for victims of domestic violence. She did the same when she moved to Italy, and she returned to England in 1997. More recently, in March 2007, she opened the first Arab refuge for victims of domestic violence in Bahrain. I hope that people may listen to her if they will not listen to me. In 2011, she said in a press release on the international day for the elimination of violence towards women:

"I applaud the efforts of Viviane Reding who is the Vice-President and Commissioner responsible for justice, fundamental rights and citizenship, Cecile G rebolvel who is the Secretary General of European Women’s lobby and Mikhail Gustatsson who is Chair of Parliamentary Women’s Rights and gender equality commission in their efforts to protect women but I am puzzled as to why this enormous empire of women with the huge self important titles manage to avoid any discussion of the effects of violence on the family, fathers and children.

If we have any hope of tackling the tragic effects of domestic violence we have to face the facts that women can and are also guilty of violence against their partners. To concentrate only of women as victims is to deny the fact that children are also abused by their mothers. We can no longer afford to cover up the huge scandal that has existed for the last forty years where only men have been held up as perpetrators of all violence.

My hope is that sufficient political pressure will be brought to bear upon these women who sit in great positions of power to acknowledge that we do indeed need to make November 25th a day when we all agree internationally that there should be zero tolerance for violence against anyone and that we will all work to make the family a safe and harmonious place.”

I think that we should listen to that very carefully indeed. It sums up entirely my view on this issue. That is a woman who has far more credentials than many people in this place, having set up the world’s first women’s refuge.

In response to a parliamentary question asked by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), the Government said that they remain committed to ratifying the convention and set out what more needs to be done:

"The previous Government signed the Istanbul Convention to show the strong commitment it placed on tackling violence against women and girls and this Government remains committed to ratifying it... The UK already complies with the vast majority of the Convention’s articles but further amendments to domestic law, to take extra-territorial jurisdiction over a range of offences (as required by Article 44), are necessary before the Convention can be ratified. The Ministry of Justice is currently considering the approach to implementing the extra-territorial jurisdiction requirements in England and Wales and will seek to legislate when the approach is agreed and Parliamentary time allows.”

According to the Library, article 44 of the convention, on which the Government were placing great weight, states:

"Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to establish jurisdiction over any offence established in accordance with this Convention, when the offence is committed:

a in their territory; or
b on board a ship flying their flag; or
c on board an aircraft registered under their laws; or
d by one of their nationals; or
e by a person who has her or his habitual residence in their territory.”

**Paragraph 2 states:**

"Parties shall endeavour to take the necessary legislative or other measures to establish jurisdiction over any offence established in accordance with this Convention where the offence is committed against one of their nationals or a person who has her or his habitual residence in their territory."

**Paragraph 3 states:**

"For the prosecution of the offences established in accordance with Articles 36, 37, 38...and 39...of this Convention, Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that their jurisdiction is not subordinated to the condition that the acts are criminalised in the territory where they were committed.”
Paragraph 4 states:

“For the prosecution of the offences established in accordance with Articles 36, 37, 38 and 39 of this Convention, Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that their jurisdiction as regards points d and e of paragraph 1 is not subordinated to the condition that the prosecution can only be initiated following the reporting by the victim of the offence or the laying of information by the State of the place where the offence was committed.”

Paragraph 5 states:

“Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to establish jurisdiction over the offences established in accordance with this Convention, in cases where an alleged perpetrator is present on their territory and they do not extradite her or him to another Party, solely on the basis of her or his nationality.”

Paragraph 6 states:

“When more than one Party claims jurisdiction over an alleged offence established in accordance with this Convention, the Parties involved shall, where appropriate, consult each other with a view to determining the most appropriate jurisdiction for prosecution.”

Paragraph 7 states that

“This Convention does not exclude any criminal jurisdiction exercised by a Party in accordance with its internal law.”

It is, apparently, because of Article 44 that the Government are dragging their feet.

Mr Nuttall: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for putting that on the record. I think it worth also noting that Article 36 refers to “Sexual violence, including rape”, Article 37 refers to “Forced marriage”, Article 38 refers to “Female genital mutilation”, and 39 refers to “Forced abortion and forced sterilisation.”

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the subjects of those articles. It was probably remiss of me not to do so myself.

It seems that the Government are hanging their hat on Article 44. Perhaps the Minister will be able to explain more about the difficulties that they are experiencing in relation to it and the other articles mentioned in it, to which my hon. Friend has just referred.

Mr Chope: Will my hon. Friend expand on the link between Article 44 and Article 77, under which a party may, in passing, be able to answer his own question, we may benefit from some of his expertise later, when he was a member of the Council of Europe. I hope that matters—which I certainly am not—but for many years over me, in that not only is he experienced in legal matters—which I certainly am not—but for many years he was a member of the Council of Europe. I hope that we may benefit from some of his expertise later, when he may, in passing, be able to answer his own question, which I am not able to do.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North tabled an early-day motion on this subject, which read:

“That this House notes that 8 June 2016 marks the fourth anniversary of the UK Government becoming a signatory to the Istanbul Convention on violence against women and girls; expresses disappointment that the Government, despite outlining their commitment to do so several times, has still failed to ratify this important convention; recognises that women still face a significant amount of inequality, with one in four women experiencing some form of domestic, sexual or psychological abuse during their lifetimes; further notes that ratifying the Istanbul Convention should ensure that a series of preventative policies will be introduced to help tackle and end violence against women, such as non-violent conflict resolution in relationships and the right to personal integrity being included in school curricula at all levels; congratulates the campaign group ICeChange for their continuing work in applying pressure on the Government to ratify the convention; and calls on the Government to accede to this pressure and ensure ratification as soon as possible.”

There are a couple of interesting things to note about that motion. First, when I last looked it had 47 signatories, so despite the contention by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan that the Government was in no support for our proposal, that unanimous support does not seem to have found its way there. Secondly, notwithstanding Members’ attempts to do a bit of back-tracking now, and to start saying that they care about violence against men as well—they offered no such views in the speeches we heard earlier—the EDM lets the cat out of the bag. Those Members do not care about violence against men. The EDM makes no mention of violence against men. It is all about violence against women. Let us not try to pretend now, at this late stage, that this is about gender neutrality; it is not, and people obviously know that it is not.

There is an awful lot to the convention—far more than I intend to go into today; I am sure Members will be relieved to hear that. Although I am sure that I would be deemed to be in order if I went into all of it, I want to hear from other speakers. Given that the Bill requires the ratification of the convention, however, it is all very relevant, and I want to put on record some of the key facts that it contains.

The Council of Europe’s website sets out the position. It says:

“In simple terms, preventing violence against women and domestic violence can save lives and reduce human suffering. Governments that agree to be bound by the Convention will have to do the following: train professionals in close contact with victims; regularly run awareness-raising campaigns; take steps to include issues such as gender equality and non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships in teaching material; set up treatment programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence and for sex offenders; work closely with NGOs; involve the media and the private sector in eradicating gender stereotypes and promoting mutual respect.”

That last bit sounds a bit like media censorship to me, but I am not entirely sure what the Council of Europe has in mind.

“Preventing violence against women and domestic violence should not be left to the state alone. In fact, the Convention calls on all members of society, in particular men and boys, to help reach its goal of creating a Europe free from all forms of violence against women and domestic violence. Violence against women is pervasive because misogynistic attitudes towards women persist. Each and every one of us can help challenge gender stereotypes, harmful traditional practices and discrimination against women. It is only by achieving real gender equality that violence against women can be prevented.”

It is clear that the convention goes well beyond trying to combat violence against women, and has a much wider remit than people would have us believe.

The website goes on to say:

“When preventive measures have failed and violence incidents have happened, it is important to provide victims and witnesses with protection and support. This means police intervention and protection as well as specialised support services such as shelters, telephone hotlines etc. It also means making sure that general social services understand the realities and concerns of victims of domestic violence and violence against women and support them accordingly in their quest to rebuild/resume their lives.

Mr Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for addressing the point I made earlier in the debate, which is that the European convention on the prevention and combating of violence against women and domestic violence, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, is not a sideshow. It is a very significant piece of work and it requires Governments that agree to be bound by the convention to ensure that there is protection for women who are at risk of domestic violence or who are violence victims. That is why 172 countries have signed up to the convention and it is why a number of countries have reported on their implementation of the treaty. It is why it is so important for the Government to do the same.

Mr Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, which makes a very good point and brings me on to the second part of his argument. It is not a sideshow; it is a very significant piece of work and an important piece of work for the Government to support it.

Mr Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point.
Some examples of measures set forth in the Convention include:

Granting the police the power to remove a perpetrator of domestic violence from his or her home. In situations of immediate danger, the police need to be able to guarantee the safety of the victim. In many instances this may mean ordering the perpetrator for a specified period of time to leave the family home and to stay away from the victim.

Ensuring access to adequate information—victims are usually traumatised and need easy access to clear and concise information on available services, in a language they understand.

Setting up easily accessible shelters in sufficient numbers and in an adequate geographical distribution: Victims come from a wide range of social realities. For instance, women from rural areas or disabled women need to have access to shelters as much as women from big cities."

There is not one mention of a male victim of domestic violence. In a moment I shall say something about the supply of refuges for men and women, because I think it important to establish the extent to which the Government are fulfilling that requirement.

The website continues:

“Making available state-wide 24/7 telephone helplines free of charge: Specialised helplines for victims of violence against women and domestic violence can direct the victims to the services they need...

Setting-up easily accessible rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres: These centres provide immediate medical counselling, trauma care and forensic services and are extremely rare across Europe. It is important to make these services more widely available.

It should be borne in mind that it is not enough to set up protection structures and support services for victims. It is equally important to make sure victims are informed of their rights and know where and how to get help.”

I absolutely agree that victims should be better protected and have more of a voice in the justice system, but as far as I am concerned that applies to male victims as much as it does to female victims. When it comes to domestic violence, it is actually male victims who have the least support, not female ones.

An Office for National Statistics report from February 2016 on violent crime and sexual offences relating to the year ending March 2015 states:

“Overall, 27.1% of women and 13.2% of men had experienced any domestic abuse since the age of 16, equivalent to an estimated 4.5 million female victims and 2.2 million male victims.”

Those are shocking figures. New data from the ONS for the year ending March 2016 found that, of those who said that they had experienced domestic abuse, 1.2 million were female and 651,000 were male. As I established earlier, of every three victims of domestic abuse, two will be female and one will be male. Yet despite that split of two thirds and one third—we must all agree on that; they are the official figures and I have not heard anybody argue against them—there is absolutely no such funding split. Perhaps the Minister will explain why.

According to the Mankind Initiative:

“20 organisations offer refuge or safe house provision for male victims in the UK—a total of 82 spaces, of which 24 are dedicated to male DV victims only (the rest being for victims of either gender).”

Men have a chance of accessing only 82 spaces, only 24 of which—in the whole country—are guaranteed for them. The Mankind Initiative continues:

“For female victims, there are nearly 400 specialist domestic violence organisations providing refuge accommodation for women in the UK with c4,000 spaces for over 7,000 women and children.”

Two thirds of victims of domestic violence are women and a third are men, but there are 7,000 places in refuges for women and a maximum of 82 for men. How can that possibly be gender neutral or fair? I genuinely want to know why people think that that can possibly be fair, if we are genuinely interested in being gender neutral. Of course, we know that many people are not interested in being gender neutral.

It is interesting, too, that male victims are much less likely to come forward than female victims, which again suggests that it is male victims who need more encouragement. According to the Mankind Initiative:

“Male victims (29%) are over twice as likely than women (12%) to not tell anyone about the partner abuse they are suffering from. Only 10% of male victims will tell the police (26% women), only 23% will tell a person in an official position (43% women) and only 11% (23% women) will tell a health professional.”

On discussing sexual abuse during childhood, the recent Ministry of Justice report, “Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2015”, states:

“12% of female victims and 25% of males told someone they knew personally about childhood sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) at the time, usually a family member (18%). Only 10% of female victims told someone in an official position, with 8% reporting the abuse to the police. Only 2% of male victims reported the abuse to the police.”

Although sexual abuse is an absolutely huge issue among girls, with only 30% of victims telling anyone at all, it is also an issue among boys, but it is being massively under-reported, with only 27% of victims telling anyone, and only 2% telling the police.

The convention’s position on the prosecution of perpetrators is interesting, too. The Council of Europe says:

“The convention defines and criminalises the various forms of violence against women as well as domestic violence. This is one of the many achievements of the convention. To give effect to the convention, state parties will have to introduce a number of new offenses where they do not exist. These may include: psychological and physical violence, sexual violence and rape, stalking, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, forced abortion and forced sterilisation. In addition, state parties will need to ensure that culture, tradition or so-called ‘honour’ are not regarded as a justification for any of the above-listed courses of conduct.”

I am not sure how we deal with psychological violence, but most of those offences can have male victims, too. That does not include female genital mutilation, obviously, as that clearly relates only to females, and male circumcision is still considered to be legal. In the case of a forced abortion, which on the face of it is a female issue, if the person doing the forcing is not the father, there is potentially a father who is the victim of a lost child, so it is not just the woman who might suffer in that situation.

According to figures obtained by the Mankind Initiative:

“Of those that suffered partner abuse in 2014/15, a higher proportion of men suffered from force (37%) than women (29%). For emotional and psychological abuse the proportions were 61% and 63% respectively.”

There is not a fat lot in it, as it happens. There is almost exactly the same number of male victims of psychological abuse as female victims.
On the issue of psychological abuse of children, the recent MOJ reports states:

“Of those who experienced psychological abuse as a child, the perpetrator was most likely to have been the victim's mother (40%) or father (35%). Women were more likely to have experienced this form of abuse from their mothers (42%) than fathers (33%), whereas men were equally likely to be abused by either parent.”

The matter of actual violence and injury is also interesting. The Mankind Initiative states:

“Of those that suffered from partner abuse in 2012/13, 29% of men and 23% of women suffered a physical injury, a higher proportion of men suffering severe bruising or bleeding (6%) and internal injuries or broken bones/teeth (2%) than women (4% and 1% respectively). 30% of men who suffer partner abuse have emotional and mental problems (47% women). Only 27% of men sought medical advice whilst 73% of women did.”

This Bill would ensure the ratification of a convention that does nothing to address domestic violence against men, just women.

I want briefly to mention the other offences that might, on the face of it, seem to apply only to women. Government figures show that one in every five victims of forced marriage in the UK is male. In 2013, there were 234 cases of forced marriage in the UK where the victim was a man. On stalking, which many will not doubt assume involves a man stalking a woman, 2.4% of men and 4.9% of women experienced stalking in 2014-15. Again, of every three victims of stalking, two are women and one is a man.

The Council of Europe says:

“Once these new offenses have found their way into the national legal systems, there is no reason not to prosecute offenders. On the contrary, state parties will have to take a range of measures to ensure the effective investigation of any allegation of violence against women and domestic violence.”

It does not say that state parties will have to take a range of measures to ensure the effective investigation of violence against men. It seems to me that that does not matter to the Council of Europe. It goes on:

“This means that the law enforcement agencies will have to respond to calls for help, collect evidence and assess the risk of further violence to adequately protect the victim.

Furthermore, state parties will have to carry out judicial proceedings in a manner that respects the rights of victims at all stages of the proceedings and that avoid secondary victimisation.”

In February 2015, the Joint Committee on Human Rights published a report, “Violence against Women and Girls”, on the UK’s progress towards ratification of the convention. Again, the report is about violence against women and girls, with nothing about violence against men and boys. I do not know what anybody else thinks, but if the son of somebody in this House is the victim of violence, would they consider that to be less important than if their daughter was a victim of violence? I would like hon. Members to explain why they think violence against their sons would be less important. We may hear about that from other Members later, but we have not so far.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): That’s because you keep talking.

Philip Davies: I am glad that I am educating the hon. Gentleman, because he certainly knew nothing about article 1 of the convention before I highlighted it for him.

Chapter 8 of the report looked at ratification, and began by setting out what others had said about it. The International Development Committee has called on the Government to do more to address violence against women and girls within the UK. Again, it is about violence against women and girls. It states that “the UK’s international leadership is weakened by its failure to address violence against women and girls within its own borders”.

Professor Kelly argued in evidence that, although the Government are undertaking good work abroad on violence against women and girls, more needs to be done in the UK:

“I think we have a hypocrisy about human rights. We talk about human rights internationally for others, and we are mealy-mouthed about it at home. If we could have a common discourse that, actually, this happens here, too—then I think we might be able to have a more constructive conversation about it.”

The Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales said:

“Ratification would emphasise that the state has a positive duty in law to intervene in a proactive way to modify practices that result in harm, violence and degradation to women and girls. It would provide a further basis in law for those who wish to persuade the state to provide adequate and meaningful resources to construct an effective mechanism to protect women from gender violence and harm.”

Again, this is not gender-neutral. How can anyone argue that the convention is gender-neutral? There is no gender-neutral language anywhere in it for anyone to read. The report set out the background to the then Government’s position, which I do not want to go through in detail.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Gentleman has said that he wants other Members to be able to get in, and I hope he will bear it in mind that we have a very long list of speakers.

Philip Davies: I appreciate that, Mr Deputy Speaker, but there are certain things that I say that nobody else can be trusted to say. If we could rely on balanced contributions from other people, some of these things would not need saying, but they clearly do need saying, so—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I may be able to help the hon. Gentleman, because who knows what people are going to say? I have a very long list of speakers, and some of them may add to what he has said, although others may not. We may get to that part of the debate if he lets them in.

Philip Davies: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I take that point on board. I assure you that others will not, not “may not” do so, but you make a good point. In that case—I think you will approve of this—rather than setting out the background to the Government’s position, I will leave it to the Minister to set out the Government’s position—

Mr Deputy Speaker: If he gets in.

Philip Davies: I would like to think that the Minister has been suitably embarrassed about setting out the Government’s position, but I am looking forward to hearing him do so.
We will not do that in our own country; we will have an international body interfering and telling us how we are doing.

**Philip Davies:** My hon. Friend may well be right. I am loth to speak up for the German Government—I do not know what their motivation is—but that is entirely possible. It may well be unwelcome to have these meddling, interfering bodies telling us how we are doing when many of those people are doing far less in their own countries than we are doing in ours. We have seen that time and again with international bodies that are supposed to monitor what we are doing. They would be better off monitoring what they are doing in their own countries, rather than monitoring what we are doing in this country.

The Council of Europe also says:

“GREVIO may also adopt, where appropriate, general recommendations on themes and concepts of the Convention.”

This would be a living document, and would not just stick at where we are today. We have seen that with the European convention on human rights. It goes on:

“The Committee of the Parties follows up on GREVIO reports and conclusions and adopts recommendations to the Parties concerned.”

We would be signing up to an ever-moving feast. It adds:

“It is also responsible for the election of GREVIO members.”

There would be two forms of monitoring procedures: a country-by-country evaluation procedure, and a special inquiry procedure. A special inquiry procedure “may be initiated by GREVIO when there is reliable information indicating that action is required to prevent a serious, massive or persistent pattern of any acts of violence covered by the Convention. In such a case, GREVIO may request the urgent submission of a special report by the Party concerned... After having been examined by GREVIO, the findings of the inquiry are transmitted to the Party concerned and, where appropriate, to the Committee of the Parties.”

What an absolute bureaucratic nightmare we will get ourselves into if we ratify this convention.

We have seen how public confidence in the European convention on human rights has been undermined time after time by ridiculous findings and perverse rulings that could never have been intended at the time it was ratified. It is perfectly clear that this convention would end up in exactly the same way: an ever-moving feast, with the goalposts always being changed to suit some politically correct agenda. The Government would be hamstrung because they had ratified something, not really knowing what they were getting themselves into.

There is even a flowchart to explain what happens under the urgent inquiry procedures. I will not say any more about that, other than to note that agreeing to be party to things obviously has consequences, and the procedures to ensure that the obligations are met are clear for all to see. There are integrated policies that
The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) has become so entrenched in this country that people understand for the life of me how political correctness is acceptable to me. It really is as simple as that. I cannot have a strategy for one but not the other. Having a strategy for one equals oppose violence against men as well as violence against women. Of course we oppose violence against women, but I for one equally oppose violence against men and boys. Having a strategy for one but not the other is just not acceptable to me. It really is as simple as that. I cannot understand for the life of me why political correctness has become so entrenched in this country that people here today can see nothing wrong with a whole policy on violence being based on just one sex, when, unbelievably, the evidence shows that it is the other sex who are more likely to be the victims of violent crime and when there are lots of male victims of domestic violence too. As I find myself saying all too often, you couldn’t make it up.

11.54 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): That is 78 minutes that I will never get back.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Let’s get on with the speeches.

Thangam Debbonaire: I have read the convention and I have spent 26 years working on violence against women and domestic violence, including working with male victims of domestic violence. I will start my very brief speech by answering some of the remarks of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies).

If the hon. Gentleman refers to what he said in his own speech and to the British crime survey statistics, he will know that the overwhelming majority of victims of sexual assault, rape, chronic ongoing domestic abuse, severe domestic abuse causing injury, coercive control and domestic homicide are female, and that that is specifically connected both to their gender and to gender inequality. Violence against women is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality. That is why we have a gender-specific convention.

If we want to tackle gender inequality—and I do—we have to tackle the specific circumstances, belief systems, structures and behaviours behind violence against women. Hence the need for the convention. The hon. Gentleman asks for neutral legislation. I say to him: when you remain neutral in a situation of profound inequality, you are only siding with the powerful against the powerless.

The hon. Gentleman asked why there are so few purpose-built refuges for men. I can tell him exactly why there are so many refuges for women because I have been part of that movement for 26 years. Women set up refuges for women. There was never anything stopping men setting up refuges for men, but I know why they have not set up many. For 10 years, I worked for Respect, which among other things runs the men’s advice line—the national helpline for male victims of domestic violence. I was the research manager there, so I know a thing or two. I can tell him that many men called the men’s advice line each year, but refuge was very rarely what they wanted. They wanted a listening ear, practical advice and legal information, and that is what they got.

I was going to speak extensively about the work with perpetrators that I have been involved in for about 10 years, but I have crossed out much of my speech because I do not want to filibuster so that the Bill runs out of time. Instead, I will quote briefly from research that I helped set up while I was the research manager at Respect, the national organisation for work with perpetrators of domestic violence and male victims. It is called the Mirabal research and people can look it up on the Respect website.

The research was carried out by Professor Liz Kelly and Professor Nicole Westmarland, who were profoundly sceptical about the value of perpetrator programmes...
when they started. However, they found that most men who completed a Respect-accredited domestic violence perpetrator programme—and yes, we only examined men in this research programme, but that does not mean that there are not female perpetrators; it just means we were looking specifically at men in this research—stop using violence and reduce the instance of most other forms of abuse against their partner. At the start, almost all the women said that their partners had used some form of physical or sexual violence in the past three months. Twelve months later, the research team found that after their partner or ex-partner had completed the programme, most women said that the physical and sexual violence had stopped—most, but not all.

Programmes do not replace the criminal justice system or civil justice system—they are a complement to it—but they are part of the solution. If we are going to put men in prison, which the hon. Member for Shipley has called for, we still need to know what we are going to do with them. They will still have relationships with their children whether they are inside prison or outside. Most of them will come out one day, and when they do they will have new partners. Why not work out how we can work with these men, many of whom say they would like to change—and some of whom do not—and whose partners often say that what they really want is for their partner to change? Most of the partners and ex-partners of men on the programmes in the research said that they felt or were safer after their partner or ex-partner completed the programme.

I have scrubbed out more of my speech—Members can look up the research online if they want to know the detail. I will give a couple of examples before sitting down and allowing the Minister to make his remarks, which I hope will be helpful in concluding this stage of the Bill’s passage. As a facilitator at the Domestic Violence Intervention Programme I found many ways in which women became safer. One was when their partner changed their attitude and behaviour and stopped using violence. We knew that because we had a separate but linked women’s partner support project that told us whether the women felt or were safer.

The programme helped some women to be safe because they themselves, for the first time, were able to get help, advice and a way of moving attention away from them as responsible for the violence and allowing them to end the relationship safely. I remember one woman in particular. I never met her. She had a newborn baby. I was working with her partner in the men’s programme. She was living under such extreme control that the only time she was free and safe to talk to the women’s support worker was when we, the men’s facilitators, had her partner in the room with us. Over several weeks, she was able to gain confidence and develop a safe plan for leaving; meanwhile, in the room with us, her partner—an arrogant man with a huge sense of entitlement—through talking a lot about his behaviour gradually revealed more and more about it, until we had enough information to report him to the authorities. They took action.

In some cases, the women and children were safer because we were able to find out more about the perpetrator’s risk to other people through the individual assessment and group work that contributed to the co-ordinated community response. For instance, one man had to put himself in the role of his own child while other men in the room re-enacted, with the facilitator, a violent incident he had committed; after that, he completely withdrew his application for child contact and sent a message to his ex-partner via her solicitor saying that he realised how frightened she and their child must be, and that he would wait until she decided the time was right and safe.

Above all, we, the group-work facilitators, modelled how a relationship between a man and a woman based on equality actually works. For many of the men we worked with, that was the first time they had ever seen that. We modelled disagreements in which we disagreed but dealt with it respectfully. As the only woman in the room, I was often the person whom the men in the room had to use to learn to manage how to disagree with a woman without being abusive, controlling or domineering, or trying to have the last word.

I know many people, particularly from women’s groups, who were rightly concerned about or even very suspicious of perpetrator programmes when they started. Some still are. That is why a good accreditation system is so important. I declare an interest: when I worked for Respect I helped develop that accreditation system. I am very proud of it, because it differentiates between programmes doing good work to challenge men, and women, who are perpetrators of domestic violence and those programmes that are not effective.

Ratifying the Istanbul convention would place requirements on the UK Government to take the steps that the convention contains. It would be a statement of commitment. In so many ways, we as a nation are ahead of the rest of the world. We have led the way in setting up refuges, developing perpetrator programmes in Scotland—where so many of my colleagues in the Change project and the Midlothian programme, subsequently the Caledonian system, work—and in England and Wales, with the DVIP and the rest. We have set up pioneering work to challenge men whose behaviour is violent and abusive. We have set up prevention work with young people in schools, something else I was involved in before becoming an MP. We have developed risk assessment and risk management.

We have nothing to fear from adopting the Istanbul convention, and neither does the hon. Member for Shipley. It does not preclude our helping men and boys, and nor should it. It merely does what it says: it acknowledges that we live in a situation of profound gender inequality, which is both cause and consequence of violence against women and girls. It is about time we ratified the convention. The safety of women and children is too important not to.

12.3 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on introducing this Bill on such an important topic with a powerful opening speech.

The Government are absolutely committed to tackling violence against women and girls in all its forms. The Coalition Government shared that commitment, and in 2012 signed the Istanbul convention to signal how seriously they took their responsibility for tackling violence against women and girls. This Government remain committed to ratifying the convention.
Before I turn to the detail of the Bill, I want to be very clear that the measures already in place in the United Kingdom protect women and girls from violence in nearly all cases, and comply with or go further than the convention requires. It is also worth taking note of the powerful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who gave us all food for thought and made the very valid point that we have to remember that there is violence against men and boys, and male rape. That is equally unacceptable, but we are dealing with one of the issues he refers to.

We know that some crimes disproportionately affect women and girls. The United Kingdom is leading the way internationally in efforts to tackle this issue in all its forms. In the last four years, we have undertaken a significant amount of work to ensure that victims are supported and perpetrators brought to justice and that we do all we can to prevent these crimes from happening in the first place.

Philip Davies rose—

Brandon Lewis: I will happily give way. [Interruption.]

Philip Davies: The Minister said that certain crimes disproportionately affect women and girls. There are more male victims of violent crime than female victims. Surely he will acknowledge that the Bill does not deal with one of the issues he refers to.

Brandon Lewis: First, I would say to Opposition Members that my hon. Friend has every right to contribute to this debate, so murmuring from a sedentary position when he wants to intervene and make a point that backs up the powerful speech he made is inappropriate and misses the point of having a debate in the House. Obviously, domestic abuse and domestic sexual abuse predominantly affect women, although I acknowledge that in terms of crime across the country, particularly violent crime, men do suffer, and my hon. Friend is right that we should be equally intolerant of that and that sentences should reflect the fact.

We have introduced new laws to ensure that perpetrators of violence against women and girls face the consequences of their actions, including the criminalisation of forced marriage, two new stalking offences and a new offence of domestic abuse covering controlling and coercive behaviour. We have also introduced new tools to protect victims and prevent those crimes from happening. We now have two new civil orders to manage sex offenders. Domestic violence protection orders have been rolled out nationally, and we have introduced the domestic violence disclosure scheme, known as Clare’s law, which allows women to check whether their partner has a violent history. We have also raised awareness among the public and professionals, including through our acclaimed teenage relationship abuse campaign, which encourages teens to rethink their views of violence, abuse, controlling behaviour and consent, as well as new statutory guidance on forced marriage, female genital mutilation and domestic abuse.

Driving a culture of change in the police’s response is also important, and we have been working on that, including by ensuring that the recommendations from Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary’s review of domestic abuse are acted upon; all forces have now published domestic abuse actions plans. We also have a range of activities to tackle so-called honour-based violence, including significantly strengthening the law on female genital mutilation and forced marriage, introducing female genital mutilation protection orders and a new mandatory reporting duty, and launching the Home Office’s unit specifically looking at female genital mutilation.

While the nature of these crimes is often gendered, many of them affect both men and women, and I recognise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley rightly pointed out, that men and boys can also be victims of domestic and sexual violence; and they too deserve support and protection. All our policies are applied fairly and equitably to all perpetrators and victims of crime, irrespective of gender, and I recognise that male victims may need more specific support. As he rightly outlined, some of the reaction on Twitter, for example, highlights why sometimes male victims might need specific support to feel the confidence to come forward, as more and more women now do.

That is why the Home Office funds the men’s advice line, which provides support to male victims of domestic violence, as well as Galop, which provides information and support to members of the LGBT community affected by violence and abuse. We are also providing central Government funding to support victims, including refugees, through the provision of rape centres, national helplines, independent sexual violence advisers and independent domestic violence advisers, as well as services to support victims of female genital mutilation and forced marriage and those seeking to exit prostitution. We are also providing funding to support new early intervention models developed by our partners in the sector.

In taking forward this work, the UK is already fully compliant with the vast majority of the convention, which requires signatories to ensure four key things: first, that legal measures are in place to address violence against women and girls; secondly, that there is appropriate support for victims; thirdly, that professionals understand the issues; and fourthly, that there is Government oversight. So we are making progress. More and more victims have the confidence to come forward, while police referrals, prosecutions and convictions for offences are all at their highest ever levels, but we are not, and cannot be, complacent. On 8 March, we published our new cross-Government violence against women and girls strategy, which sets out our ambition that by the end of this Parliament no victim of abuse is turned away from the support they need.

That strategy is underpinned by increasing the funding by £18 million for tackling violence against women and girls between now and 2020. This includes protecting the funding for rape support centres; £1 million for national helplines; a two-year fund for refugees; and a new £15 million violence against women and girls transformation fund to promote the very early prevention and intervention that has been outlined. This dedicated funding is supported by funding for innovative programmes provided through the police transformation fund and the police innovation fund. There is the troubled families programme and further funding through the tampon tax.

In addition, we published last week a national statement of expectations, which sets out the action that local areas should take to ensure that victims get the support
they deserve. We published guidance for local commissioners and announced that we would introduce a new stalking protection order to allow the police and the courts to intervene early to keep victims safe and to stop stranger stalking before it escalates. We made available a range of additional resources on domestic abuse, including updated guidance on the domestic violence disclosure scheme. We want to see this new funding and the new tools that we have introduced used to aid, promote and embed the best local practice, and ensure that early intervention and prevention become the norm.

The measures we have introduced since 2012 have helped to strengthen our compliance with the Istanbul convention. As I have said, in nearly all cases, we comply with, or even go further than, the convention itself requires. Although some have suggested that the UK’s not ratifying the convention signals a lack of commitment to tackling the issue internationally, I should stress that we, as a country, have played a leading role in ending these crimes overseas.

We should be proud of the international leadership we have shown at the global summit to end sexual violence in conflict and at the 2014 girl summit to end female genital mutilation and forced marriage. The Department for International Development runs a £35 million programme to tackle FGM, and a £36 million programme to end child, early and forced marriage. It is also helping many countries to take more effective action to tackle violence against women and girls. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has increased its programme resources to tackle these issues by more than 60% in recent years, and its spending on these projects has increased by £2.6 million since 2015.

As I say, we are absolutely committed to ratifying the convention, but before we do that, we must ensure that we are fully compliant with it. We have already taken one of the legislative steps necessary to ratify it by criminalising forced marriage as required by article 37. Members have referred to specific articles, so let me deal with one that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley rightly pointed out.

Further amendments to domestic law are necessary to comply with the extra-territorial jurisdiction requirements, which are in article 44 of the convention. Article 44 requires the United Kingdom to take extra-territorial jurisdiction over these offences established in accordance with the convention when committed abroad by UK nationals. We already have extra-territorial jurisdiction over some of the offences covered by the convention, including the common-law offence of murder, sexual offences against children, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. However, we need to amend domestic law to take extra-territorial jurisdiction over a range of other offences—in England and Wales, as well as in Scotland and Northern Ireland—before we are fully compliant and able to ratify the convention.

As a general rule, Government policy on the jurisdiction of our courts is that criminal offending is best dealt with by the criminal justice system of the state in whose territory the offence occurred. Exceptionally, taking extra-territorial jurisdiction is necessary to address serious crimes committed overseas as a matter of domestic policy or as part of an international consensus in which we participate. Any extension, moreover, has an impact on the criminal justice agencies—courts, prisons—including potentially increased demands on their resources. We need to ensure that we are able to consider carefully the extent to which it is necessary to take extra-territorial jurisdiction for compliance with the convention.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford rose—

Brandon Lewis: We have considered the Bill carefully, but before I outline that, I happily take the hon. Lady’s intervention.

Dr Whiteford: I am grateful to the Minister. Does he agree that rape is a particularly serious offence that should be covered by extra-territorial jurisdiction, and that the deterrent aspect of extra-territorial jurisdiction will stop women from being taken out of the country to be violated?

Brandon Lewis: As I said, a range of areas, including murder, sexual offences against children, forced marriage and female genital mutilation, are already covered. The whole point is that we need to look carefully at what is covered by extra-territorial jurisdiction before we take a step further in that regard.

We have carefully considered this Bill and we support its key principles, which place a duty on the Government to take all reasonable steps to enable us to become compliant with the convention, and require the Government to lay before Parliament a report setting out the steps to be taken to enable us to ratify the convention and to make an annual report to Parliament, as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan outlined in her opening speech, on the measures taken forward to enable the UK to ratify the convention, including any legislative proposals, and post-ratification any measures to ensure we remain compliant.

As I have made clear—and as my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) also made clear in her powerful speech—we are committed to ratifying the convention, and in principle therefore we welcome this Bill. However, there are some aspects of it which we will need to consider carefully. As Members will appreciate, the Istanbul convention applies to the whole of the UK, and it covers areas which are devolved, such as crime and criminal justice matters. I am therefore keen to ensure that we have appropriate time to consult more fully with the devolved Administrations on the measures in this Bill. In particular, the Government have concerns about the timescale put forward in clause 2, which would require the Government to lay a report that includes the date within four weeks of the Bill receiving Royal Assent by which we expect the UK to be able to ratify the convention. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan mentioned areas that could be considered for extra-territorial jurisdiction. Any new ETJ provision will require primary legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as England and Wales, and I therefore have some reservations about the four-week timescale.

In addition, clause 3(1)(e) would require the Government to lay an annual report post-ratification which set out the UK’s ongoing compliance with the convention. As Members may be aware, once we have ratified the convention we will be required to provide updates to the Council of Europe on compliance. This clause risks duplicating that existing requirement.
Seema Malhotra: Has the Minister been able to consider any alternative timetable that he might bring to this House if he disagrees with what is proposed in the Bill, and can he also commit in principle that Government time will be allocated to the ratification of the Istanbul convention?

Brandon Lewis: I hope my next words will put the hon. Lady’s mind at rest. Both those points and any others Members may wish to raise are areas we will all want to consider more fully in consultation with the devolved Administrations and return to in Committee. However, at this stage I am pleased to say the Government support the Bill in principle.

12.17 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his words and will address them in some detail. I want to start, however, by congratulating the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on securing this private Member’s Bill and on the hard work and graft she and her team have put into making sure this issue remains on the Government’s agenda, maintains a high profile and is given the recognition in this country that it deserves. She said in her opening remarks that there had been 58,000 cases of domestic violence in Scotland in one year alone, and she went on to say that one in three women across the world will experience some form of abuse. That shows us why both this debate and the ratification of the Istanbul convention are so incredibly important.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) described her experience in her constituency and said that a police officer had told her that we are more unsafe in our own homes than we are on the streets. Again, that clearly illuminates the scale of the problem and the risks women are facing on a daily basis. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) spoke very emotionally of the work she did when running a refuge and made us all realise that Christmas is a very significant time for many families, when women are doing everything they possibly can to experience a safe Christmas, if not a joyful one.

I agreed with the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on one point: all of us in this House want true equality, but we get true equality by dealing with gendered violence when we see it, so that then we can go forward on an equal basis. Sadly, unless we ratify the convention and unless the Government keep doing their sterling work to eliminate violence against women and girls internationally, we will never get that to point.

It was particularly poignant to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) speak about her former role at the highly regarded charity Respect, where she worked on perpetrator programmes to prevent violence. We focus so much on the crime that we tend not to focus on prevention, which is where we fall short as a society. Unless we address the underlying motivations that lead to violence and coercive control within relationships, we will never eradicate the problem—no matter how good our legislation is.

My hon. Friend once said something that has always stuck with me: over the decades that she worked with offenders, she met only one or two where, had there been appropriate intervention at an early age—whether at six, 16 or 26—they would not have become a perpetrator. It this House’s duty to ensure that perpetrator and early intervention programmes are at the core of all that we do.

Turning to the Minister’s remarks, I welcome his saying that he will do much more work with the police. This is about not only about getting legislation here, but getting it applied on the ground to protect everyone and to ensure a safe society for all. I commend the police because they have moved seamlessly from not even really acknowledging in some cases that domestic violence could happen to actively getting involved in tackling it. I ask the Minister to ask the police to ensure that the children are safe when they attend domestic violence callouts because I still hear about cases in which that was not automatic.

I am pleased to be able to say from the outset that I support the Bill, and I am proud that the Leader of the Opposition has confirmed that a Labour Government would ratify the Istanbul convention. In a post-Brexit Britain, international conventions and their obligations will become more important than ever, providing us with an external perspective and the chance to learn from other countries. International human rights conventions create clear standards and minimum expectations that every citizen can rely on.

The elimination of violence against women and girls is an area of great importance to this House and one in which we should always be aspiring to achieve more. Ending violence against women and girls requires a radical, seismic, societal shift in power and attitudes, and this House must be instrumental in that work. We need to acknowledge that this is gendered violence carried out against women and girls because they are women and girls. It is this that makes the Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, otherwise known as the Istanbul convention, so important. It is an historic convention that provides an international legal framework for tackling violence against women and girls. It is the first of its kind, and I am proud that a Labour Government led the negotiations that brought it into existence. If implemented, the convention would provide a step change in how violence against women and girls is considered, tackled and prevented. It requires states to take comprehensive action, set out minimum standards and create legally binding measures to tackle and prevent violence against women and girls.

The Istanbul convention sets out the need to place victims at centre of all measures to tackle violence against women and girls. It highlights the role of civil society and calls on Governments to ensure that organisations have the resources and recognition required to do a good job. It sets out clearly what survivors of violence need, and can expect, from their Governments to live in safety. Importantly, it calls on states to prevent violence and to take steps to eradicate the prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices that contribute to violence. The sheer strength of the convention serves only to highlight how disappointing it is that the Government have yet to ratify it. It has now been four years and six months since they signed it.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley said, the Government should be congratulated on their progress to end violence against women and girls.
The Home Office’s strategy for ending violence against women and girls shows a demonstrable commitment to tackling these heinous crimes. I particularly welcome the fact that the Minister went into some detail about the work this Government are doing internationally, as it is a source of great pride to us all as a country, and they should be commended on it. But we do have so much further to go. As the Equality and Human Rights Commission has said, a legislative commitment to implement the Istanbul convention would drive forward important and necessary changes to the way the UK protects women and girls against violence. Without ratification, the convention is just a piece of paper. Without ratification, it affords no one rights, it creates no minimum standards and it is impossible to hold the Government to account.

The Government have said that they are committed to ratification, and I am grateful to the Minister for that, yet despite a co-ordinated and consistent campaign from Members from across the House, charities and the public, the Government appear to be dragging their feet. The Minister has said that the Government need to establish extra-territorial jurisdiction over a range of offences, as required in the convention, prior to ratification, but they have been saying that since July 2014. Both Home Office and Ministry of Justice Ministers have given the same excuse for their failure to ratify the convention for two and a half years. It is understandable that obstacles to ratification exist—they existed for all the signatory countries—but our Government are yet to inform the House what exact legislative changes are needed.

Will the Government set out the timetable for overcoming the obstacles to ratification? How many offences will need legislative change? As the Minister said, these changes will cut across devolved and reserved powers, so what conversations has he had with three devolved Parliaments and Assemblies? Will the Government commit today to setting out a timetable to achieve the cross-UK and cross-government changes needed to ratify the convention? We understand that changes to domestic law are required, but the Bill will hold the Government to their commitments.

I believe that two substantive areas of Government policy would require improvement to meet the provisions under the convention, although these things absolutely would not prevent ratification. First, there is an urgent need for statutory, age-appropriate, sex and relationships education in schools, to give children the knowledge, resilience and confidence they need to maintain healthy friendships and to recognise abusive or coercive behaviour. The convention contains explicit requests for education work to help prevent violence, and we can make huge steps towards fulfilling this requirement with statutory sex and relationships education. Secondly, the convention gives all survivors of domestic abuse the right to access the specialist support services, which they need to live in safety and rebuild their lives, yet refuge services see their funding shrink rapidly. Without a strategic approach to the delivery and funding of specialist domestic violence services across the country, this Government cannot claim to meet the provisions in the convention.

To conclude, the Bill would provide a duty to take all reasonable steps to overcome the final obstacles towards ratification. It would push the Government forward on the reforms needed to meet provisions in the convention, such as sustainable funding for specialist refugees, and statutory sex and relationships education in schools. The Bill would provide us with the evidence we need that the Government truly are committed to ratification of the convention and a timetable to prove that they will do it. We need urgent action to tackle and prevent violence against women and girls, and the Bill would show that the Government are committed to that goal. I therefore urge all Members to support the Bill.

12.28 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): First, I wish to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) for bringing this private Member’s Bill to the House. For me, tackling violence against women and girls is not a party political issue; it is a matter of basic humanity that unites us all across this House. We have all heard the statistics: one in three women globally is subjected to physical or sexual violence. It is appalling that 20 years after the UN declared violence against women and girls a global pandemic, almost half the women who were homicide victims around the world were killed by intimate partners or family members—just 6% of men suffered the same fate. Earlier this month, the femicide census powerfully set out how 936 women in this country have been killed by men in England and Wales in the past six years—that is three women every week for six years. We owe it to those 936 women to do all we can to tackle violence against women, whether it occurs in our constituency, our county, our country or in the wider world.

I was asked to attend this debate by several constituents, including Kirstie Stage who is in her lower sixth year at a school just outside my constituency. She said to me that “our failure to ratify the Istanbul convention, which we helped to draft, is embarrassing.”

We all appreciate the fact that legal complexities take time to unpick. I am glad that the Minister has been able to clarify what progress has been made and to indicate a pathway on how the remaining issues will be resolved.

I thought long and hard before making a contribution today, because we have heard some very powerful speeches in recent weeks from people with direct personal experience who are now front-line campaigners. It is important that MPs such as me—white middle-class males—also contribute. Violence against women and girls is an issue that we should all take very seriously, and it is important to our constituents that we do so. It should not be just left to females and campaigners to make the case, because these crimes are largely committed by men, and we as men must challenge those men. This is not just a women’s issue or a gender issue, but a human dignity issue that should exercise all our society.

As constituency MPs, we all see the human impact of domestic violence—how it ruins families, leads to long-term health problems and leaves lasting emotional impacts. We also see the importance of local front-line services in providing safe spaces where women can start to rebuild their lives. I pay tribute to the Salisbury women’s refuge and all its staff for the outstanding work they have done over the past 32 years.
When I visited last July I was reminded that refuges are unique services. When other support is not accessible or appropriate in a crisis of such sensitivity, they provide a much-needed safe breathing space. In the Salisbury refuge, staff work around the clock, 365 days a year, to help women, and often their small children, to live independently and to access the support they need. It is more than just a safe building; it provides counselling and emotional support. It also provides budgeting assistance and access to educational programmes. As the manager, Sue Cox, said on our local radio Spire FM, it is about making sure that “by the time they leave, everything’s on top form.”

Such services are truly vital, and it is therefore extremely welcome that the Government have pledged £80 million in funding to protect them and that the Minister has pledged to ensure that this resourcing remains under review. I hope that, if necessary, further resources will be provided in the future.

Protecting victims is a key plank of the Istanbul convention and includes accessible shelters, 24/7 telephone helplines and crisis centres. Not every country has the same infrastructure and wealth of non-governmental organisation expertise that we do. In many places, such things remain aspirational. When we ratify the convention, we will be sending a clear signal that we want to see those services extended, so that they can work effectively not just in our constituencies but everywhere around the world.

As the Bill rightly notes, this is not an issue that can be resolved by one individual agency. The convention calls for “concerted action by many different actors”, and for the Government to ensure that we have “comprehensive and co-ordinated policies involving government agencies, NGOs as well as national, regional and local parliaments.”

It is important to consider how we can work across constituency boundaries at a national level. Since 2010, this Government have made preventing violence against women and girls and supporting survivors a key priority. I pay tribute to our Prime Minister for her commitment to keeping this issue at the top of the agenda and to ensuring that the national strategy did not fall by the wayside.

I welcome the significant new legislation that has been introduced to tackle stalking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and revenge pornography. Crucially, a new domestic abuse offence ensures that coercive or controlling behaviour can be punished appropriately. The speed at which these changes have been made demonstrates the Government’s serious commitment to ensuring that professionals have all the right tools at their disposal. This is reinforced by the fact that in 2014-15 we saw total prosecutions for violence against women and girls offences reach the highest levels ever recorded. However, sometimes the legal tools are not enough. National action is also needed to address the root causes of inequality and discrimination and to support programmes that prevent domestic violence from happening in the first place. As the Prime Minister wrote in the foreword to the Government strategy, “From health providers, to law enforcement, to employers and friends and family we all need to play our part.”

Every interaction must be treated as an opportunity to intervene. The femicide report talks about a girl who was just 17 years old telling her family she knew that one day her ex-partner would kill her, and he did. As MPs, we have to ask how such critical failures can occur, and what more we can do to stop them in future. That will require not only a shift in attitudes, but an understanding of the value of preventive and educational programmes.

In my county, the Swindon and Wiltshire police and crime commissioner, Angus Macpherson, recognised the value of such approaches through innovation funding. Splitz is one such charity that was commissioned in Wiltshire. It used a grant of £35,000 to develop a project working directly with young people on what a respectful relationship was. At the start of the project, about 60% of young people recognised the different forms of domestic violence, which increased to 93% at the end of the project. If just 10% of the audience of those workshops were better able to identify the signs of abusive relationships early on, financial savings could be in excess of £5.6 million, to say nothing of the human and emotional cost to victims and families that could be avoided.

I hope that the £15 million three-year transformation fund will recognise the long-term benefit and value of such and similar preventive measures.

As I have said, the Istanbul convention is about more than just the UK, and part of what we are here to debate today is the global dimension of violence against women and girls. On average, just over a third of women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence at some point in their lives. In some countries, this figure increases to 70%. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of suffering around this issue. The world is now more uncertain, with constantly changing threats, and we so often feel powerless to alleviate the devastating impact of war and internal conflict that we have seen all too recently in places such as Aleppo. It is therefore heartening to be reminded that the UK has played such a leading role in promoting international action to tackle violence against women and girls wherever it occurs. We can take heart from the progress that has been made in recent years and the Government’s efforts to move this issue up the international agenda.

For instance, the momentum generated by the 2014 girl summit demonstrates how significant UK leadership can be in prompting change. Over 490 signatories were secured for the girl summit charter on ending female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage. Following the summit, 18 Governments in Africa, the middle east and south Asia have made commitments to end these practices. National summits in Brazil, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal and Zambia show the model was successful in spurring national politicians and civil society to action. It is important that we continue to support these initiatives to ensure that commitments made on paper are translated into practical action on the ground.

I wish to highlight two other areas where the UK is pioneering new approaches and leading the way globally. The first is in tackling human trafficking. Adult women account for almost half of all human trafficking victims globally, and women and girls together account for about 70%. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 has made the UK a global leader, and we must now use that position to work internationally to achieve the UN target to eradicate this practice by 2030.
Preventing sexual violence in conflict is the second area where the UK has made substantial progress. Following the global summit held in London in June 2014, the UK has committed over £30 million to support projects in Bosnia, Iraq, Kosovo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and others. The UK’s team of experts have been deployed more than 80 times overseas, where they provide training on how to document and prosecute crimes of sexual violence, how to support survivors and how to protect civilians from human rights violations.

The Department for International Development has galvanised the international community and provided significant financial resources to tackle violence against women and girls. It now has 23 major programmes with a total budget of £184 million. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact reviewed this work earlier this year and, I am pleased to say, gave it its highest rating—something we should all be extremely proud of in this House.

As a man, I might say that I wished to speak today because I am a husband, a brother and a father, but I wish to contribute simply as a human being, moved to speak by the existence of this abhorrent practice, which shames our common humanity. These are global problems that will need different international solutions in different jurisdictions.

I pay tribute to the Government and their predecessor for the decisive leadership they have shown on many of these matters. It is important that we continue to build on their landmark achievements. The Istanbul convention offers us a clear opportunity to demonstrate once again our commitment to upholding the rights of women and girls, in this country and way beyond our borders. I am confident the Government recognise this opportunity and will act as soon as possible.

I commend the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan once again for her leadership in bringing this Bill before the House today, and I will be supporting it in the future.

12.41 pm

Michelle Thomson (Edinburgh West) (Ind): I aim to be fairly brief today. I commend and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) for bringing the Bill forward. She spoke most eloquently.

I want briefly to reference the speech I made last week and to give some thanks, first, to the Speaker’s Office and, you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for being very supportive of me, and to my friend and colleague, the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin), who has been a great support to me.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I am undeserving of any praise, but I want to say that the hon. Lady inspired my wife, three days ago, to talk for the first time of her sexual abuse at the age of only six years. It is a great tribute to the hon. Lady that she has done so much for so many people. [Applause.]

Michelle Thomson: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for that. But, of course, I made my position very clear: it was not about this individual here; it was about women more widely, and indeed men, who have also been affected by sexual or physical violence. I spent most of last weekend personally answering the literally hundreds of emails I got, and it was truly humbling, because people, for the first time, were writing their own stories and sharing their own stories. One phrase jumped out at me. Somebody said that they recognised that “black burden that shadows a survivor’s back.” We need to keep that at the forefront of our minds at all times.

That is why we have debates about this issue—about legislation and so on. It is about our driving need for change and leadership, and I commend the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) for offering his perspective on that. It is leadership and the driving need for change that we must keep at the forefront of our minds all the time.

I again challenge the Minister that while warm words about a spirit of intent are incredibly welcome, we are looking for hard, specific dates by which something will be done, because we need to send a message that resonates with the wider world that these things are unacceptable. Our culture, in many areas of the UK, is completely unacceptable. If there is one thing I learned last weekend from reading all these emails, it was the extent to which these stories go unheard.

Again, I say thank you to everybody who has supported me—I wanted to put that officially on the record. Finally, I thank all those agencies that—day in, day out, week in, week out, month in, month out—give their support to people who are in the most difficult circumstances.

12.44 pm

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) and congratulate her on introducing this debate. I am pleased to support this Bill and pleased that the Government will support it as well. That is not because I think that the Government are insufficiently committed to this agenda but because I think that our ratifying the convention in due course will set an example to other countries. This Government have done an enormous amount in the past few years to combat violence against women and children, both domestically and abroad. I was pleased to hear even the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) say that the Government had done a great deal in this area. As one of the Government’s toughest opponents, praise from her means that we probably are not doing too badly. However, that does not mean that we should be in any way complacent about the work we do on tackling violence abroad or domestically.

Every week, two women are murdered by their partner or ex-partner, one of whom last year was sadly my constituent, Kelly Pearce. Whenever I am asked by a journalist or a member of the public whether I fear for my own safety after the horrendous murder of Jo Cox, I always reply that statistically I am still more at risk, as a woman, from a partner or an ex-partner. That is a fact that we cannot stress enough. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) was very eloquent about the need for gender balance and equality, but I think that even he will recognise from experience of sexual violence cases as a constituency MP that domestic abuse puts an enormous strain on our police, our social
services, and our health system, as well hurting our economy. Above all, it is damaging to the lives of the women affected and, in turn, their children. If we look purely at the economic and social effects of this crime, we see that there is an argument for the Government to be doing much more to tackle it and its wider social costs.

Over the past 12 months, I have taken part in the excellent police force parliamentary scheme, which has been a real eye-opener as I have seen the incredible work that Essex police do day to day. I have worked with various departments, including Operation Juno, which is part of Essex police’s domestic violence unit. Essex police handle more than 90 domestic abuse calls every day, but Essex County Council suggests that the real picture of domestic abuse is likely to be closer to 125,000 incidents a year, the majority of which, of course, are not reported to anyone. Unfortunately, while we see that there is an argument for the Government to increase in the number of people being charged for domestic violence and sexual abuse.

I have no doubt that much of this progress is due to the legislative changes that we have introduced in this House, whether on coercive control, stalking, Clare’s law, or revenge pornography. It is also due to the increasing resources that Essex police and other services are committing to this area. Essex police have invested significantly in media awareness campaigns. They have created specialist units and incorporated domestic abuse into the force’s performance framework. There has also been investment in training and communications so that officers and support staff are aware of their responsibilities in protecting vulnerable victims and survivors; they have even created a manual. However, they acknowledge that they cannot end domestic abuse in Essex solely by themselves, and they are therefore working very closely with other organisations, including Essex County Council, on some fantastic awareness campaigns.

I would like to draw Members’ attention to the Change project, which is being run jointly by Essex County Council, Essex police, Thurrock Council, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, and the NHS. It is a social media campaign aimed at encouraging abusers to reflect on their behaviour. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley will be pleased to know that there are many examples in the campaign of women abusers being asked to reflect on their abuse towards male and female victims, so it is very gender-balanced. It is a superb campaign that is having real results, and I commend it.

We should all be pleased that more victims are coming forward to report domestic violence. The higher numbers in that regard should not be seen as a sign of failure but a sign that we are getting the message across and that the way in which the police are operating means that more and more people are willing to come forward.

Domestic abuse in relation to the workplace remains a serious problem. About 75% of people who endure domestic violence are also targeted while at work. It might be harassment by phone, text, stalking outside the workplace, or even turning up there. Domestic violence also sometimes makes it difficult for employees to get to work, perhaps due to injuries that they want to hide or the perpetrator’s having taken their car keys, money or work documents. Workplaces need to understand better the domestic abuse problems that their staff could be suffering, making them unable to fulfil their work duties. Too often, we hear of victims of domestic abuse losing their jobs because that is not understood or recognised at work, which leaves them even more vulnerable and isolated. Members may be interested to know that as a result of an initiative by Elizabeth Filkin the House of Commons is running a joint programme with the organisations Inclusive Employers and the Corporate Alliance Against Domestic Violence to raise awareness among employers of how to tackle domestic abuse in the workplace.

I have spoken as fast as possible because I know that we are short of time. Let me end by saying that I know the Government are serious about tackling this problem. I hope that their continued commitment to doing so, and the changes that we are making, are rapidly making life better for women who suffer domestic abuse, and will ensure that they report it more confidently in future.

12.50 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on introducing this tremendously important Bill. I want to focus on the issue of domestic violence in relation to women with disabilities.

The comprehensive nature of the Istanbul convention is welcome. The convention requires states to take all necessary measures to protect all victims from any further acts of violence, which means properly funded support through refuges, health and social care, legal and psychological counselling, financial assistance, housing, education, training, and assistance in finding employment. In cases of domestic violence, access to specialist services is vital, but according to the charity Women’s Aid there has been a reduction of more than 200 in the number of bed spaces in refuges in England over the past four years. The current estimate is 3,639, but the estimated capacity requirement is at least 5,000. The charity also reports that local authority commissioners frequently favour non-specialist, generic providers who may not give survivors the expert support that they need.

The need for specialist services is particularly acute in the case of disabled women, who are, by definition, more vulnerable and may face greater challenges in seeking help. It has been estimated that they are twice as likely to experience domestic violence as non-disabled women, which is a shocking statistic. Disabled women are also likely to experience abuse over a longer period and to suffer more severe injuries as a result of the violence, often because of the difficulty of escaping and finding alternative accommodation. It is likely that both the overall rates of domestic abuse and the rates of domestic abuse experienced by disabled people are much higher than reported. Generally, studies have shown that the risk factors are lower educational attainment, unemployment and poverty, but we also know that domestic abuse is suffered by people of all genders and classes.

Domestic violence is caused by one person’s desire to exert power and control over a partner. Disabled people are likely to be more physically vulnerable to abuse, and
less able to protect themselves. Abusers can include carers, whether they are partners, family members or paid carers, and the disability or impairment is often exploited by the abuser. Domestic abuse of a disabled person can take specific forms. For instance, a partner may withhold vital care, medication or food, or remove or damage equipment such as sensory or mobility aids in order to limit the person’s independence. If someone has a visual impairment or mobility problems, a partner may create obstacles around the home. The abuser may claim disability benefits on the person’s behalf, and then limit her access to funds. The abuser may also use her disability to criticise or humiliate her, or threaten to tell social services that she is not fit to live alone.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The hon. Lady has raised a crucial point about people controlling finances. Members who support the Bill will be specifically supporting disabled women who require protection from the social and economic impact of domestic abuse.

Margaret Greenwood: That is indeed an important issue.

It can be much more difficult for those who are disabled to communicate what they are suffering, and also to escape from their abusers. People with severe sensory, cognitive or communication impairments or mental health issues may have particular difficulty in communicating that they have been abused. Disabled people may be more socially isolated as a result of their disabilities, and more dependent on their partners or other carers. That, of course, often includes older people. When a partner is her carer, a disabled woman may have fewer chances to attend medical or other appointments alone, and may therefore have fewer opportunities to tell someone in confidence about the abuse. The Government have allocated funding for early intervention in cases of domestic abuse, but in the case of disabled people it is important to recognise that it may be especially difficult for someone to come forward and report abuse for practical reasons, or for the abuse to come to light at an early stage.

Some disabled women may feel particularly nervous about leaving their partner if they have had special adaptations made to their home. They may also worry about who will care for them if they move away, or about a change to their care package in a new area that could leave them with less support. Women with disabled children may also be hesitant in seeking help, because of concerns about the child’s healthcare and the emotional impact that leaving their home may have on the child.

That is why it is important that funding is not cut for domestic refuges by capping local housing allowances for people who use them. After leaving refuge providers in great uncertainty while carrying out a prolonged review, the Government have at last announced that refuges will be exempt from the local housing allowance cap on housing benefit rates for those in social housing until 2019, when the new funding model will be introduced. I urge the Government to work closely with specialist providers such as Refuge and Women’s Aid to design the system that will be introduced after 2019; to give particular attention to the needs of disabled women; and to ratify the Istanbul convention.
just a weapon of war. When women seek to put food on the table or seek safe passage from a village under bombardment, they may have to trade their body to get food and clothing, or to get to a place of safety, and that is rape in every sense of the word. I must tell the House that that violence is under-reported and we should call it out.

I realise that we are short of time, and other hon. Members want to speak, but I wanted to talk about HIV. In many such countries, a woman who is raped and violated suffers from stigma, and a raped and violated woman who is HIV-positive is even more isolated and stigmatised. Such women are often thrown out by and isolated from not just their family, but their villages and communities. If we are to break the cycle of sexual violence and HIV infection, we must ratify the convention, and we must send the message today that we want that to be done quickly.

1.1 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to be able to contribute to this debate on the ratification of the Istanbul convention. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on introducing the Bill. Naturally, I was disappointed not to be successful in the ballot for private Members’ Bills, but I am delighted that she has used her success as an opportunity to raise this extremely important issue. I have been campaigning on this cause since I was elected.

Women’s Aid, the White Ribbon Campaign, Zero Tolerance and many other organisations have all played an important part in this cause, and we owe them our thanks. I want to pay particular attention to IC Change. If I was allowed to say that Becca, Rachel and Robyn are in the Gallery today to watch the proceedings, I would say so, but I am not allowed to, so I won’t. I thank them and other volunteers from IC Change who have worked extremely hard. They have held a series of lobby sessions and pestered every Member of the House to ensure that they are aware of the convention and of the positive effect that its ratification would have on tackling violence against women.

Tackling violence against women and girls is not a party political issue. As long as violence against women and girls occurs in our society, we should be united in our pursuit of ending that violence. We need to recognise that domestic abuse is deep-rooted in the societal inequality between men and women, and that women are far more likely to experience domestic abuse.

That brings me on to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). I rarely agree with him, and in fact, I sometimes question whether I am from the same species as him. He brought up the subject of violence perpetrated on men. All violence is shameful, but the vast majority of cases of violence against men are perpetrated by men, which is the point of today’s proceedings. His attitude is not shared by as many people outside this Chamber as he thinks.

Like every decent-minded person, I want to live in a world where no one has to live with the fear of violence hanging over them. It sickens me that so many women live in a house where violence is the norm. Violence against women and girls happens primarily at home and is largely hidden.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) talked about women’s refuge services. As an ambassador for Inverness Women’s Aid, I have seen the great work that refuges do to help women to get back on track. Does my hon. Friend agree that refuges throughout the UK should be protected in the way that was described earlier?

Gavin Newlands: Absolutely. I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We have heard many instances of the support that refuges offer. I am pleased to say that I support my local refuges. In fact, a local charity is building a new refuge at Jubilee House in Renfrewshire. My hon. Friend’s point is well made.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): As we are approaching the Christmas period, will my hon. Friend recognise that it is at Christmas that most domestic violence happens in the home? Can we therefore wish all women and young girls who are watching this debate a very safe Christmas, and wish all the refuges all the support they need to deal with what we know is likely to happen over this time?

Gavin Newlands: Absolutely; my hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. Before Christmas last year, I highlighted the increased incidence of abuse at Christmas time. I completely agree with what she said.

As we have heard, the stark reality is that a third of women will face violence in their lifetime. That is the reality that has motivated me in working towards ending the violent, sexual and psychological abuse that too many women still face.

The Istanbul convention aims to tackle violence against women on a number of fronts and covers such areas as prevention, protection, support, monitoring and prosecution. Crucially, it establishes a link between achieving equality between men and women and eradicating violence against women. As long as the structural and systemic inequalities of power and the objectification of women persist, the abuse will continue.

That is why I am particularly keen on article 14, which addresses the importance of education. It states that all Governments should ensure that there is “teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity”.

I am passionate about this point and believe that it provides an ideal opportunity to introduce a coherent, structured and consistent prevention programme in our schools. That is the missing link in the gender-based violence chain in the UK.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I am listening intently to the hon. Gentleman’s excellent speech. Does he agree that the key problem is men—obviously, it is men perpetrating the violence—and that there is a responsibility on all of us as men, as well as on women, to talk to other men about how it is completely unacceptable to use violence and abuse against women? We must step up to the plate and speak out by becoming ambassadors for White Ribbon and other organisations. We must
preach to the unconverted and ignorant men in our land and across the world who continue to perpetrate this unnecessary violence.

Geraint Davies: It is the responsibility of men to ensure that the convention is ratified as soon as possible. Delay alone should shame the Government into action. Since then, 22 countries have ratified the convention, but their ratification of it is long overdue. It should be embedded in more informal education facilities and in life.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on bringing forward the Bill. Does he agree that the Government need to ratify the convention as soon as possible to prevent further incidents of abuse against women like the one that took place against a constituent of mine two weeks ago, leaving her on a life-support machine?

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more. That is a shameful story. The important thing about the Bill is that it forces the Government to take the action that they have promised to take at some point, but have not found the energy to take. I will come on to that point in a moment.

I was talking about article 14 and education. The article also sets out how the principles of the convention should be embedded in more informal education facilities such as sports clubs, cultural centres and leisure facilities. The White Ribbon campaign, which stresses the positive role men can play in ending gender-based violence, is working hard and delivering training sessions on that very subject. It uses male ambassadors to act as role models for young boys. If we can eliminate sexist behaviour at an early age and engender a deeper sense of respect in boys, I believe we can prevent some of them from turning to this devastating gender-based violence later in life.

The UK Government signed up to the Istanbul convention, but their ratification of it is long overdue. It is just under a year since I first wrote to the then Home Secretary and current Prime Minister, urging her to ratify the convention. The letter, which was co-signed by more than 10 organisations, urged the Government to introduce a series of preventive policies that would allow us to take effective action against the violence that one in three women face in their lifetime. Unfortunately, I have to say that I received a fairly weak response from the then Home Secretary. I have continued to receive disappointing responses from the Government after every call I have made on this issue.

The Government signed up to the convention in 2012. Since then, 22 countries have ratified the convention, while the UK has been left behind. The average time taken for ratification has been just over two years. The UK has so far taken four years and six months. That delay alone should shame the Government into action to ensure that the convention is ratified as soon as possible.

Violence against women is not a women’s issue. As the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) said, it is a societal issue. It is the responsibility of men to ensure that women and girls do not have to face violence. The White Ribbon all-party parliamentary group, which I co-chair, stresses the positive role men can play by helping to challenge the sexist attitudes and behaviours that far too many men still exhibit. The White Ribbon campaign also actively supports the convention, as I have said.

This House and wider society uniting against the violence that affects too many women is extremely important. Those in a violent relationship deserve to have us work together in our pursuit to end that violence. We should not forget the power of this place. Passing this Bill will send a strong message to the thousands of women and girls who have experienced domestic abuse that they are not alone and that we stand with them. It will also say to the perpetrators of domestic, sexual and psychological abuse that that violence is completely unacceptable and that they will be held to account. Let us unite around the Bill and play our part in changing history for the better for women and girls.

1.11 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Before I became a Member of Parliament one thing I did as a volunteer was work in a homeless outreach service, spending time, usually late at night, finding people who were going to be sleeping rough that night and seeing whether we could help get them into some kind of shelter or safe place to spend the night. On one of my most memorable nights doing that, I met a lady sleeping rough on the steps of a church in Brixton. As we took her to a shelter, I asked her about her circumstances. She told me that she was married but had fled her home that night because she was frightened of staying there; because of what her partner might do to her she was frightened for her life. She felt safer sleeping rough on the steps of a closed church in a dark and frightening park in Brixton than spending a night at home under her own roof. The fact that someone could feel safer sleeping rough than in the same house or flat as their partner brought home forcefully to me the enormous and very present threat that violence from their partner is in someone’s life.

That was just one example of what we have been talking about today, the day-in, day-out abuse of women in their homes—in what should be a safe place. That abuse also affects men and children, but we know that it predominantly affects women and girls, as they make up two thirds of the victims. We are therefore rightly focusing on what can be done to help that sector of society, although we are not overlooking the fact that we should also be doing something for men under threat of violence as well, and it is right that that has been brought up in this debate.

Other Members have talked about the enormous scale of this violence in our society. I am short of time, so will not reiterate the figures of more than 1 million women subjected to domestic abuse every year in the UK. But I want to put on the record that I welcome this debate, and congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on bringing the Bill forward and on all the work she has put in and support she has garnered. It is so important to be talking about this issue here in the UK, in Europe and the world, to shift some of the cultural norms that so often underpin domestic violence and try to change the childhood
experiences that can lead to someone thinking, as an adult, that the way to solve a problem is through violence rather than any other means.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady talks about scale. I have to say that since being elected I have been very shocked at the scale and severity of some of the cases that have come to me, including that of a constituent whose child was murdered by her partner and who had to change her name and move a number of times. Does the hon. Lady agree that refuges and women’s aid organisations, such as my one in West Lothian, need the Bill, to give them the legislative framework, the power and the resources to continue to do their work and up the ante?

Helen Whately: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I will be supporting the Bill. On the importance of local refuges and services, I would like to mention one in my own constituency, Swale Action to End Domestic Abuse, which provides one-stop shops and drop-ins for people affected by or suffering from domestic abuse, and its success in reducing levels of repeat domestic abuse incidents in the area. Sadly, that is reducing the number of repeat incidents rather than preventing them in the first place, but it is a step forward.

We heard today a paradoxical point about progress. The increase in the levels of reporting of domestic abuse and of convictions might not seem like a good thing, but paradoxically it is a good thing and a sign of progress. [Interruption.] I think I might have run out of time. There might be a need for Members to express their great pleasure on something that has happened to clap. There might be a need for Members to express their great pleasure on something that has happened to clap.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

The House divided: Ayes 133, Noes 2.

Division No. 113] [1.16 pm

AYES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Atkins, Victoria
Barclay, Stephen
Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackwood, Nicola
Bone, Mr Peter
Brennan, Kevin
Brook, Deidre
Brokenshire, rh James
Brown, Alan
Buck, Ms Karen
Buckland, Robert
Butler, Dawn
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Champion, Sarah
Cherry, Joanna
Churchill, Jo
Chew, rh Ann
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Hayes, Helen
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hendry, Drew
Hinds, Damian
Holmes, Stewart
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kerr, Calum
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Chris
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Malhotra, Seema
Mathias, Dr Tania
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, rh John
McGarry, Natalie
McLaughlin, Anne
Milton, rh Anne
Monaghan, Carol
Morton, Wendy
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
Norman, Jesse
O’Donnell, Sarah
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Pawsey, Mark
Pearce, Teresa
Penning, rh Mike
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sharma, Alok
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheppard, Tommy
Siddiq, Tulip
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Cat
Spencer, Mark
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stuart, Graham
Thewliss, Alison
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Turner, Karl
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Mr Robin
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes: Marion Fellows and Mr Alan Campbell

NOES

Chope, Mr Christopher
Hollóbone, Mr Philip

Tellers for the Noes: Philip Davies and Mr David Nuttall

Question accordingly agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We now—[Interruption.]—Order. There is absolutely no need to clap. There might be a need for Members to express their great pleasure on something that has happened about which they are joyful—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Yes, that is the way to do it.

Question put accordingly, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 135, Noes 2.

Division No. 114] [1.29 pm

AYES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Atkins, Victoria
Barclay, Stephen
Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackwood, Nicola
Bone, Mr Peter
Brennan, Kevin
Brook, Deidre
Brokenshire, rh James
Brown, Alan
Buck, Ms Karen
Buckland, Robert
Butler, Dawn
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Champion, Sarah
Cherry, Joanna
Churchill, Jo
Chew, rh Ann
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Hayes, Helen
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hendry, Drew
Hinds, Damian
Holmes, Stewart
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kerr, Calum
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Chris
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Malhotra, Seema
Mathias, Dr Tania
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, rh John
McGarry, Natalie
McLaughlin, Anne
Milton, rh Anne
Monaghan, Carol
Morton, Wendy
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
Norman, Jesse
O’Donnell, Sarah
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Pawsey, Mark
Pearce, Teresa
Penning, rh Mike
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sharma, Alok
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheppard, Tommy
Siddiq, Tulip
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Cat
Spencer, Mark
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stuart, Graham
Thewliss, Alison
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Turner, Karl
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Mr Robin
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes: Marion Fellows and Mr Alan Campbell

NOES

Chope, Mr Christopher
Hollóbone, Mr Philip

Tellers for the Noes: Philip Davies and Mr David Nuttall

Question accordingly agreed to.
Bone, Mr Peter
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brokenshire, rh James
Brown, Alan
Buck, Ms Karen
Buckland, Robert
Butler, Dawn
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Champion, Sarah
Cherry, Joanna
Churchill, Jo
Ciwyd, rh Ann
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
Debbonaire, Thangam
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Durkan, Mark
Efford, Clive
Ellison, Jane
Eustice, George
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Foxcroft, Vicky
Freer, Mike
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Glen, John
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Grady, Patrick
Greenwood, Margaret
Hall, Luke
Hands, rh Greg
Harris, Carolyn
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, Helen
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hendry, Drew
Hinds, Damian
Hosie, Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Johnston, Diana
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kerr, Calum
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Chris
Lewin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Mahotra, Seema
Mathias, Dr Tania
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, rh John
McGarry, Natalie
McLaughlin, Anne
Milton, rh Anne
Monaghan, Carol
Morton, Wendy
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
Norman, Jesse
Olney, Sarah
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Pawsey, Mark
Pearce, Teresa
Penning, rh Mike
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sharma, Allok
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheppard, Tommy
Siddiq, Tulip
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Cat
Spencer, Mark
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stuart, Graham
Thewlis, Alison
Thomson, Michelle

Thornberry, Emily
Turner, Karl
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Mr Robin
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen

Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wishart, Pete
Wragg, William

Tellers for the Ayes:
Owen Thompson and
Mr Alan Campbell

Tellers for the Noes:
Philip Davies and
Mr Christopher Chope

Question accordingly agreed to.
Bill read Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): May I say how delighted I am to see Members waving their Order Papers instead of putting their hands together? Progress.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have a unique procedural point—certainly I have never come across it since I have been in Parliament. On 7 December, the House passed by 448 votes to 75 an Opposition motion that includes the private Member's Bill that I am to present today. Unfortunately, because of the length of the first debate, we will not reach my Bill. However, we have had seven hours of debate on an Opposition day, so when I move the motion at 2.30, would it be appropriate for nobody to object to it, because the House has already debated the exact motion for seven hours? Is that how it works?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Well, I fully understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. In fact, it might possibly be a genuine point of order, but he knows that, regardless of the length of time a matter has been debated in this House, if the House decides that it wishes to support a motion or a question and no one opposes it, then of course it will pass without opposition. However, if even one person opposes the Bill—he knows this very well—I will be obliged to require further consideration. I am grateful to him for raising that unusual point, whether or not it is a point of order.
Double Taxation Treaties (Developing Countries) Bill

Second Reading

1.42 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I wish to start by quoting a statement from the UK Government with which I agree 100%—[Interruption]—strange as that may seem. The UK Government’s aid strategy states:

“International development is about much more than just aid.

I am bringing this Bill forward, because international development is about much more than just aid.

I became interested in these types of issues many years ago when I first started doing international work. My first such job was for the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. Over the years, I have worked on 26 international assignments that have involved countries in the developing world. I have worked in places that I did not even know existed before I was asked to accept a contract—being a Scotsman I accepted the contract and then looked up the place on the map. I have been in places such as the Marshall Islands, in the middle of the Pacific ocean, and in the middle east, in places such as Oman and Yemen—where at one stage I thought I was being kidnapped—but most of my time and 16 of my assignments have been in Africa. On my last assignment before joining this House, I was funded by the Norwegian Government to evaluate the Benguela Current Commission’s research unit, which was researching the Benguela current as it ran up South Africa, Namibia and Angola.

I have had a long interest in development matters. I have never been funded by a charitable body, always by bilateral Government arrangements or sometimes at the request of the United Nations or the World Bank, as well as on a couple of occasions by the Asian Development Bank. One thing that struck me in my early days doing such work was that although I believe passionately in aid and funding and that the Government have done absolutely the right thing by being at the forefront of paying an agreed percentage of GDP to the developing world, that will never be enough to address the needs of some of the poorest countries in this world. Indeed, there is great danger in seeing international development solely as a function of aid.

Let me tell the House one thing. There have been estimates that if somehow the world was able to stop all the tax evasion and tax avoidance in the continent of Africa, and to clean up the system, including in the small areas I am considering, the tax that could be earned in Africa would be far greater than the entire international aid that is fed into Africa. My challenge today is to people who say that they do not like international aid in the sense of our sending money for good purposes to the developing world.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I wonder whether my hon. Friend has anyone in mind when he says that.

Roger Mullin: Funnily enough, I have more than one person in mind. If we were to scour this House I might well find one or two who take that position, but I do not think that today is a day to be mean-spirited about anyone.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The hon. Gentleman should not invite a voice-activated intervention.

Roger Mullin: I can tell this is going incredibly well already.

One thing I wanted to say at the beginning of my speech was that, being who I am, I could have been very disappointed in the raffle, but here I am with 45 minutes or thereabouts to discuss my private Member’s Bill. Most Members would be keen to get a full hearing and a vote, but I know that that is not going to happen with this Bill. However, I could not be prouder than to have my Bill considered following the one that this House has just chosen to accept. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] I am sure that there are many people who feel the same.

I come back to my experiences in different parts of the developing world. In the agencies I worked with over the years, I came across many people who, although they were devoted to helping alleviate poverty and engage in capacity building and believed in the need for aid—many had worked in this field for many years, including a great friend of mine from Lossiemouth called David Thomson, who has worked in more than 60 countries—they also passionately believed that we would never cure the problem until we liberated those countries so that they could better take care of their own resources.

What do we know about international taxation treaties or double taxation treaties? They are set up for firms, such as UK firms, that operate in a developing country but are headquartered in the UK. They are often called double taxation treaties because nobody wants a company to be taxed twice on the money it earns. So these treaties were set up—in many cases, many years ago—to try to prevent double taxation.

However, over the past 10 to 15 years, what we have seen developing are not treaties that allow companies to be charged in just one place, but treaties that are part of an arrangement that allows too many international and multinational corporations to avoid paying tax in any country. We want to find ways in which we can assist countries in the developing world to take responsibility—to take care of their own taxation system and to invest taxes in their own society as they see fit, thereby building a capability that means they are no longer dependent on traditional aid.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward the Bill. Does he agree that one country that could really benefit from being able to mobilise its own domestic resources through taxation is Malawi? He spoke about treaties being agreed some time ago. The treaty currently in place between the United Kingdom and Malawi is in fact between the United Kingdom and the colony of Nyasaland, because it was signed before the country achieved independence—something, of course, that we in Scotland hope to do eventually as well.
Roger Mullin: If memory serves me correctly—I go back much further than 1955—the treaty with Malawi does not include goods such as televisions, because they did not even exist in Malawi in those times. The treaty is so out of date that it does not capture the nature of modern commerce. The UK Government have been making moves in recent times to renegotiate the treaty, and that is very welcome, but it remains the fact that there is still a place for that 1955 treaty today, and it is by no means the only such treaty.

Research has been undertaken by, for example, ActionAid, and I compliment it on the campaigns it has been running and thank it for the assistance it has given me in constructing this small Bill. That research looked at more than 500 double taxation treaties throughout the world and suggests that despite all the good work the UK Government have done over the last 10 years or so, the United Kingdom and Italy still have more restrictive treaties than any other country—around 13 are still in place.

What are taxation treaties about? They are about how much tax should be paid. Some restrictive treaties actually prevent Governments from imposing taxes—say, some types of corporation tax—that they may wish to impose, so they remove democratic responsibility in terms of countries putting together their tax.

The second thing taxation treaties typically deal with is where the tax is actually paid. In a bilateral relationship, the treaty often favours the country where the company is headquartered. Why are companies in advanced western societies—not just the UK, but the US, Germany, Italy and the like—engaged with developing countries?

I do not know of any international corporation that wants to move its headquarters from London, Edinburgh, New York or Berlin to site them in some poor country in central Africa, but they do want to operate there. Why is that? The typical type of operation is to exploit the country's natural resources—minerals and the like. In another country I am very familiar with—Namibia—there is diamond mining, which is exploited by some large Australian corporations, among others, and uranium mining. Other types of natural resources are found in the Benguela current, which has some of richest fishery grounds in the world.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I have had an association with Zambia through fundraising, and on a trip there I became aware of almost a new form of colonialism. There are many Chinese companies where not only the leaders but the entire workforce are Chinese, so copper is being mined, the profit is being taken away and there are no jobs at all going into the local economy.

Roger Mullin: I was unaware of that case, but there is a parallel. When I was first asked to go to Namibia shortly after its independence to meet members of the Government in the large fishing port of Walvis Bay, they asked me and the others who were there to do a study on how they could Namibianise, as they called it, the fisheries sector. We asked why that was a priority, and they said, “We have one of the richest fishing grounds in Africa, but we've been under the apartheid regime of South Africa and that form of colonialism for years. There isn’t a single company in Walvis Bay owned by Namibians, and more than 90% of the people employed in the whole sector are non-Namibians.” The Namibian Government eventually took control and Namibianised the entire fisheries sector within 10 years, and it was more productive afterwards. It was a great success. Perhaps we tend not to hear about the successes where Governments in Africa and elsewhere take control and make a real difference for themselves.

I passionately believe that if we could liberate these countries to have more control of their own economies and taxation systems, that would move them away from any culture of dependency that some people say they have. It would be more liberating for them and better for everyone all round. I could be wrong, but I believe that it would be a better way, in the longer run, to achieve everyone’s objective of removing the scourge of the type of poverty that exists in these countries, with which we are entirely unfamiliar in the United Kingdom.

Patrick Grady: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again; he is being very generous with his time, as he is in so many aspects of his conduct. One country in central Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, should be one of the richest countries in the world. We all carry a little bit of the DRC around with us in our pockets because that is where the coltan that makes our mobile phones comes from. Yet because of the factors he is describing, it is one of the world's worst conflict zones. Does he agree that effective tax treaties would not only Namibianise resources for Governments in such countries to invest in the development of those countries but help to strengthen their governance, bureaucratic and civil service structures, which would in itself provide stability and development?

Roger Mullin: I agree entirely. I will respond to that with a slight oversimplification. Let us look at it in this way. If a country has become solely dependent on aid funding for its development and does not have full control of its own taxation and its own mineral resources, what kind of governance structure is set up to accommodate that? It will be about people chasing aid funding, not developing and liberating themselves economically. In some countries, quite a large part of their administration and democracy is based on managing aid-related matters much less than on managing its own taxation and related matters. Therefore, the infrastructure will benefit through such moves.

I think that the Bill will provide a further advantage for the United Kingdom Government. In another field, I have been trying to persuade the Government to respond to my representations about international criminal activity in Scottish limited partnerships. I am delighted to see that the Financial Secretary is present to respond to the debate, because last week we had what I thought was an extremely constructive meeting about the issue. We recognised that to address the issue of Scottish limited partnerships we had to involve not merely the Treasury but the Home Office and its Criminal Finances Bill, as well as the businesses that would be conducting a consultation. Three different partners would need to be brought together, so that we could begin to create a joined-up approach.

What I am saying, and what my simple Bill is saying, is this. Would it not it be a good idea if those who are responsible for negotiating tax treaties with countries in
the developing world had to take reasonable account of our own Government’s international aid policy, because otherwise the Government’s international aid policies, and what they want to achieve in that regard, could be countered in a negative way through the negotiation of tax treaties by others who do not support those aims? It must surely be helpful to governance here, as well as in other countries, to create a system that is much more joined-up. That is surely in everyone’s interests. Who is going to argue against it? Well, my hon. Friends and I can probably predict who, but it seems to me that no rational person could object to a Government’s pursuing their aims in a joined-up and rational manner.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this extremely important issue to our attention. Does he agree that his proposals would also go some way towards creating sustainable jobs and livelihoods in developing countries, an ambition that sits firmly at the heart of the sustainable development goals that the UK Government are signed up to achieve?

Roger Mullin: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. The joined-up approach that I mentioned is not just within Departments; it comes about through international commitments that the Government have made to others. It is therefore good that we sign wider international treaties relating to development.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): “Trade over aid” was mentioned earlier. Many companies and organisations in the United Kingdom, and particularly in Scotland, will benefit from the Bill. The Glasgow film-maker Carol Cooke, who runs Scrumptious Productions, works with Barefoot in Business in Uganda to support grassroots women’s organisations and encourage women to run their own local businesses. The Bill will help more businesses of that kind, in the UK and specifically in Scotland, to go out to countries that are trying to develop their local economies.

Roger Mullin: That is a wonderful example. Double taxation treaties will benefit people in a wider sense—a cultural sense—although that is not stated in the Bill. If we can achieve fairer tax and fairer trade, along with mutual respect and more cross-pollination between countries than we have today, that, in its own modest way, will contribute to a more peaceful world. Generally, the more people engage with each other, the less likely they are to deal with each other in less than rational ways.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I commend the work that the hon. Gentleman has done on the Bill, and, of course, the work done by ActionAid. He has referred to fair tax and fair trade. I hope that the Bill will proceed, so that it can be improved in one significant respect. If there are indeed to be the new trade deals with developing countries that we are told there will have to be in the post-Brexit world, they should not take place without new tax treaties. The Bill deals with when such tax treaties are introduced, but it does not insist on their creation. That would be insisted on if new trade deals had to be accompanied by new tax treaties.

Roger Mullin: My main response to the hon. Gentleman is to apologise for being higher up the ballot than he is, because obviously he could have made a much better job of this than I have, but I hope that he appreciates my modest efforts. I agree with what he said. This is a modest Bill; it does not ask for anything particularly dramatic. I am only too well aware that it is likely to have technical flaws that the Government would like to address. If the Bill progresses to Committee, I would fully expect amendments to be tabled and debated, because that is what this process is about. A Second Reading debate is about the principles of a Bill, not about whether every i has been dotted and every t crossed. I would be keen to see the hon. Gentleman’s point brought in to strengthen the Bill, if it progresses.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I appreciate my hon. Friend promoting the Bill. Following on from the point made by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), does my hon. Friend agree that, if the UK is going to be much more responsible for negotiating trade deals than it has been in recent years, it would be good to start the process with a big gesture of good will to put us on a much better footing with regard to negotiating both trade and tax deals in future?

Roger Mullin: My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I appreciate the point made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), but—I am not particularly criticising the hon. Gentleman, who addresses this House with expert rhetoric and I can always hear what he says—I am taking this opportunity to make a point about other Members who are sitting in that corner of the Chamber. It is not just an old-fashioned rule that when you stand up to speak, you must address the Chair; if you do not, your voice goes into the corner and the Minister, other Front Benchers and I cannot hear what is being said. I appeal to Members that, even though they are currently exchanging interventions with one another in that corner of the Chamber, they please address the Chair, because everybody else wants to hear what is being said. I am not criticising the hon. Gentleman; I am just asking for his co-operation.

Roger Mullin: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your wise words and for giving me the compliment that others in the Chamber wish to listen to me.

On the post-Brexit situation, I am sure that many hon. Members will acknowledge that there has been great concern about the imbalance between the negotiating ability of the UK Government, who have not employed negotiators for many years, and the capacity of the 27 remaining EU countries, which will have access to all the negotiators. It is thought that the Government will be at a disadvantage by having to face large numbers of really skilled negotiators and using people who may be less skilled.

I ask the Government to think about what we are saying about how treaties are negotiated between a country as powerful as the UK and countries such as Malawi and Namibia. I have been in countries that do
not have any of their own negotiators. Even worse, they sometimes have to bring in people from a country in the developed world to assist them in negotiating with that very country. When I was in a country in Africa, I worked alongside a German who was funded by the aid organisation GTZ, and part of his task was to negotiate on behalf of that country with the German Government. We can see that there is scope for difficulty—compromise and the like—in all that. We need to make sure that we build capacity in such countries to enable them to ensure fairness. There is an ethical responsibility on us to ensure that we deal with those countries fairly, which is in the interests of everyone.

The Minister is keen to have sufficient time to respond, so I will leave my remarks there, other than to say that I am very grateful to hon. Members for staying and showing an interest in what, for me, is an important matter. I wish everyone a happy Christmas.

2.10 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I will be extremely brief because, as the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) has said, we want to hear the Minister’s response, which I hope will be constructive.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath and ActionAid on the campaign they have waged to bring the Bill to fruition. The thrust of the objectives he has set out is to ensure a fairer balance between wealthy countries and source countries in such negotiations, and we wholeheartedly support that. I regret the way in which the Bill is timetabled—unfortunately, it may fall—but I hope there will be an opportunity for it to be brought back. The Labour Opposition will support it if it is brought back. I will sit down shortly, but we need to address a couple of issues. Concerns have been expressed about the drafting and development of such treaties. There is criticism of the lack of openness and transparency, and that almost follows from our parliamentary procedures. In the American system for scrutinising trade deals and agreements of this sort, there is an open committee process through which evidence is provided in advance of the legislation being agreed. In this House, the deal is brought before us following its agreement. I realise that there may well be issues about confidentiality in the negotiations, but when the Bill comes back or there is another Bill on the same subject we should reform the parliamentary procedure to make the process more open and transparent and to allow more engagement with interested parties.

The other issue on which we need to work on a cross-party basis is how to align our taxation policies with our development objectives. As we have heard in the discussions so far, there is a need for greater work with the Department for International Development and the Treasury to consider the development of tax policy in this country so that it is more in line with our development policies for tackling poverty across the world.

Having made those few remarks, I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the Bill. He certainly has our support. If there is another parliamentary opportunity to enable the Bill to proceed, we will support it. If not, I hope another Member of the House will bring forward a Bill at some future date to achieve the objectives that he set out so eloquently.

2.13 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): I am grateful to colleagues on both sides of the House for giving me an opportunity to respond to this debate, because both this Bill and this subject are important. I want to respond in the constructive way in which the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) advanced his argument.

Let me make it clear from the start that I very much share the aims of the hon. Gentleman’s Bill. I share his belief in the importance of the UK’s efforts to tackle poverty in developing countries—we have achieved a great deal of cross-party consensus on that in recent years—and I think we would all very much agree with the thrust of his argument that it is absolutely vital to help countries to build capacity and to move beyond the need for aid.

Patrick Grady: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: I have only just started, so if the hon. Gentleman does not mind I will get a little further into my speech before I give way.

I reassure the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath that tax treaties enable countries to achieve that objective by helping to encourage the stable environment that can pave the way for sustainable economic growth and facilitate revenue collection, which is another important point that he drew out in his remarks. Although we are in full agreement about the important principles of the Bill, the lack of feasibility in its practical requirements means that the Government are unable to support it. I will come on to outline those requirements, but I first want to say a few words about our commitment to aid in general.

Patrick Grady: That was the question that I wanted to ask. It would be very helpful for the House if the hon. Lady put it on the record that the Government remain committed to the 0.7% aid target, because there has been speculation in the press, including reported comments from the Chancellor, that their commitment might be wavering.

Jane Ellison: It was only this week that the Prime Minister responded directly on that subject, so the hon. Gentleman does not need my assurance because he has had it from much higher up the governmental food chain.

As the hon. Gentleman intervened earlier on the subject of Malawi, I want to get to this point on the record. I have done a lot digging into this issue. It is true that we are negotiating an updated treaty with Malawi, which we hope to conclude soon, but the Malawian Government have stated that there is no evidence of any UK companies using the UK-Malawi treaty to deprive them of their revenues. An official statement from the Malawian Government said that
“both the Malawi Government and the British Government, as well as the nationals of the two countries, have evidently acted in good faith to ensure that neither party is exploited on the basis of the current agreement.”

I wanted to give the hon. Gentleman and the House that assurance on the Malawi treaty.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) has some laudable aims, but that he is pushing at an open door because the Government have already taken substantial action and agreed to implement two of the base erosion and profit sharing outputs? They are therefore travelling in the direction he is asking for.

Jane Ellison: My hon. Friend is right. The OECD’s BEPS project is really important in addressing some of the issues the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath talked about. The UK has played a leading role in that project and will continue to do so. A large number of countries have come on board with those principles and we will continue to move forward on them.

It is worth restating that the UK became the first G7 country to meet the UN target of spending 0.7% of gross national income on international development. The way in which we tackle the challenges in developing countries is very much in the spirit of what has been discussed in this debate. We understand the idea of helping people to develop capacity and independence so that they are not dependent on aid. At the heart of what DFID and the Government are doing is the idea of strengthening people so that countries can move forward and develop.

We help people to strengthen their economies and reduce their reliance on aid in a range of ways. Last year—I am particularly proud of this because it involves HMRC working closely with DFID—we committed to doubling the funding for tax projects in developing countries through the Addis tax initiative. HMRC has set up a specialist tax capacity-building unit, which deploys staff to developing countries to provide technical tax expertise. It is working closely with DFID on that.

Bilateral tax treaties can play a part. Treaties are important in encouraging private sector activity in a partner country. We know how powerful a force that can be in driving up employment, providing quality goods and services, and raising crucial tax revenues, which finance public services in those countries. We have about 130 treaties with countries across the globe, including several with developing countries, to support and sustain cross-border trade and investment by tackling double taxation and clamping down on cross-border avoidance and evasion.

The treaties are reached through negotiation by experienced officials from HMRC and are highly technical documents. Let me provide assurance on the specific points the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath made about who is involved and the process that goes into those documents. They follow consultation exercises that help to establish appropriate priorities. That process includes the consideration of representations made by UK businesses, NGOs, other Departments including DFID and the UK’s missions based in developing countries. The approach to these treaties is very collaborative and open so that we reach the right priorities that work for both parties. Decisions on the negotiation or renegotiation of a tax treaty are taken on the basis of a range of factors, including the results of HMRC’s periodic review of the tax treaty network and the role of treaties in promoting development. The Government already strive to take wider issues, including development, into account and align our tax treaties with our wider development policies.

I know there are some concerns about the treaties, and some have been alluded to today. Let me be very clear that the UK never ties our wider assistance or investment to such treaties. We cannot impose tax treaties on other states, including developing countries, and we never try to do so. Every tax treaty we negotiate is necessarily a reflection of the interests and priorities of both states as equal partners. That of course will mean some trade-offs. Sometimes developing countries face a trade-off between reducing their tax rates and rights to encourage investment and maintaining those rates and rights and so risking losing investment. That is their judgment to make. Before engaging in a treaty negotiation any country would think about what its priorities are.

Mark Durkan: I have noted all that the Minister has said, but she must recognise that there is a concern that some of these treaties work more as double evasion treaties than as double taxation treaties. Beyond the treaties, in the last Parliament, against the grain of what the Government say they are about in the BEPS process, the controlled foreign companies rules were changed unilaterally and at the expense of developing countries’ exchequers.

Jane Ellison: There are two things I would say. First, our work on double taxation treaties cannot be seen in isolation from the wider work we have led through the OECD on the BEPS project and a lot of the legislation we have passed. Since just 2015, there have been more than 30 different measures that will come into effect on avoidance and evasion.

My second point, to reiterate what I was saying before I took the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, is that these are mutually agreed treaties. If a country is not comfortable with anything being proposed—not that the UK would propose anything close to what he suggested—the treaty is mutually agreed and it is right that we respect the balance developing countries wish to strike in negotiations as much as we would respect any country’s position. Our network of treaties with developing countries demonstrates that. We have no power to force a developing country to sign a treaty that is against its interests, and would never try to do so. If the UK and a potential treaty partner cannot come to an agreement that satisfies us both, the treaty simply will not go ahead.

I turn to some of the specific issues that the Bill would entail for any Government negotiating such treaties, because while we respect and agree with the thrust of the Bill’s intent, we do not think we could, from a technical point of view, carry out some of the analysis that the Bill suggests.

Let us take, for example, the idea of assessing the impact. Given the long time scales, the complex and shifting interactions with domestic law and the lack of a reliable comparator, we believe it is simply not possible to produce meaningful estimates of the revenue effects
of a tax treaty in the sort of timeframe that the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath is suggesting. These are long-term projects with partner countries. Successive Governments have never attempted to produce assessments of the effect on the UK, let alone for a partner country. To attempt to do the latter—to assess the impact for the partner country—would very likely not be welcomed by that country, as it would essentially represent the UK’s uninvited judgment of its tax policies. I entirely endorse his comments about mutual respect. However well intentioned, the idea of our passing judgment on another country’s tax policy runs counter to the key principle of mutual respect.

Roger Mullin: I am afraid that I do not accept the Minister’s point about evaluation for the following reasons. She says we have very good treaties, which are well respected and work well. How do we know that they work well if there is no evaluation of them? No one was suggesting that any evaluation would be one-sided. It is perfectly possible to have bilateral or multilateral evaluations.

Jane Ellison: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but I still cannot agree with him. He asks how we can show benefits. I repeat that countries enter into these agreements willingly. We have over 130 of them, and there are more in the process of renegotiation, particularly those that are outdated. Countries would not be seeking to renegotiate or enter into that bilateral discussion if they did not feel there was mutual benefit in their doing so.

I have recently signed several such treaties—we have recently exchanged treaties with Colombia and Lesotho—and had the opportunity to talk to countries about why they do it, and it is clear they believe it is to our mutual advantage. Over time, these bilateral relationships must be to our mutual advantage. It is also worth noting that countries can rescind treaties. If countries did not think it to their advantage, they could rescind the treaties. We have not locked countries into these arrangements; they are entered into by mutual agreement, and countries can exit from them.

The Bill also asks us to assess the benefits of foreign direct investment, but again that would be very difficult, if not impossible, on the basis that FDI depends on such a wide range of factors. Investors will consider all sorts of things, including: existing and planned infrastructure; changes to the country’s legal system; political stability—often critical in the developing world; the education level of the workforce; and access to markets. The idea that we could assess in isolation the direct contribution of a tax treaty is impracticable. It would be part of a mix that moves a developing country from poverty to greater wealth; during that journey, all those things, and more, begin to fall into place to produce an environment in which wealth can be created to the benefit of the country because people want to invest there. To analyse one of those things in isolation, however, would be an extremely difficult proposition.

Mark Durkan: On the Minister’s point about mutuality and the nature of any treaty discussions, would she agree that when bilateral trade deals are negotiated post-Brexit they should be accompanied by new tax treaties, negotiated at the same time, in the spirit of mutuality she has talked about?

Jane Ellison: Brexit is a bit of a red herring in this regard. These agreements are bilateral, and the vast majority are outside the EU, although we have them with EU member countries too. I am happy to respond to the hon. Gentleman with further details, but his point is not directly relevant in the way he suggests.

Mark Durkan rose—

Jane Ellison: No, I will not give way again. To be fair to the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, the promoter of the Bill, I want to deal with a couple of his other points.

Parliamentary scrutiny was mentioned. We have a system whereby tax treaties are subject to parliamentary scrutiny and debate before they can enter into force. That means scrutiny through a Delegated Legislation Committee. There is a gap of several months between signature and debate, which gives hon. Members ample time to acquaint themselves with the contents of a treaty and to inform robust debate. There is also both the power and the precedent for referring treaties to the Floor of the House. That has not been done since 1984, but I would be delighted to discuss any of these on the Floor of the House if Members were moved to bring them forward.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for championing this issue and for the constructive approach he has taken. It has given us the chance to put on the record what I believe is an admirable track record in this country.

I will mention one more thing that might be of interest to the House. The Department for International Development is supporting the OECD’s new “tax inspectors without borders” initiative, which has raised more than $260 million of additional revenue in developing countries to be spent on public services. Again, this is a record we can be proud of across parties.

While we fully support the principles of the Bill, many of its provisions are already in place, and where they are not that is due either to the technical difficulties involved or to the unintended and undesirable consequences that such measures would involve.

The debate has served to highlight a number of things, particularly the role that tax treaties can play in providing certainty and stability for increased investment in developing countries; the importance of our tax treaties being tailored to meet the individual tax policies of our partner countries; and the considerable impact that the success of these treaties can have on sustainable economic development.

Although we do not support the Bill, I would like to thank the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath for securing the space to consider these issues—

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 20 January 2017.

Business without Debate

CROWN TENANCIES BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object. Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 January.
SEXUAL OFFENCES (PARDONS ETC) BILL
Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (21 October),
That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Debate to be resumed on Friday 20 January.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (NATIONAL DATA GUARDIAN) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 13 January.

WITHDRAWAL FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION (ARTICLE 50) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 13 January.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Further to your advice earlier in this session, is it not extraordinary that the Member who objected was the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), the Deputy Chief Whip of the Labour party, whose motion is identical to the one that I have just moved? Is there any way I can get that on the record, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which was, of course, not a point of order, but a point of information. He asks how he can get it on the record; he has just done so.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Changes to our national health service are being planned all over the country, which are going to have profound implications for the quality of health, the availability of both primary and secondary services and for the size and location of our hospitals. There has been justified criticism of the secrecy with which this process of producing so-called sustainability and transformation plans has been carried out. The Department of Health has produced a five year forward view and a very large number of plans. I want to focus on the north-east London sustainability and transformation plan draft, which was published on 21 October, and on the eight delivery plans supposedly to implement it.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I want to put on record my personal gratitude to my hon. Friend on behalf of all the residents of Walthamstow, because we know that these plans are not going to be subject to parliamentary scrutiny. The fact that my hon. Friend has secured this debate today might be the only opportunity we have in Parliament to look at something that will fundamentally transform their local healthcare services.

Mike Gapes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who spends a great deal of time, as I do, campaigning with her local council to improve the NHS locally. Throughout our sub-region of north-east London, we are all concerned about what we are facing.

The King’s Fund reported in November that the speed of development of these plans means that “patients and the public have been largely absent” from the process and that NHS England has instructed that freedom of information requests should be “actively rejected”. Locally in north-east London a freedom of information request for the financial and working detail of the STP was rejected in November on the basis that: “Disclosure would be likely to inhibit the ability of public authority staff...to express themselves openly...and explore extreme options...Deliberation needs to be made in a ‘safe space’ to develop ideas and to reach decisions away from external interference which may occur if there is premature public or media involvement.”

My local council, Redbridge Council, has been concerned that it has not been adequately involved in the process. It has made it clear that it will act in the interests of our local community and that Redbridge will not be signing off or endorsing the STP unless we are satisfied that it is in the interests of Redbridge residents.

I understand that the STP programme boards are not required to hold meetings in public, and no agenda or minutes are published. The secrecy surrounding this process has not been helpful in building public trust and has caused suspicion within communities all over the country—I speak particularly from local experience—as to the intentions of the proposals. In many respects what could be a reasonable response in the circumstances to the crisis we face in terms of future funding, the ageing population and other challenges to the NHS, is being undermined because of process issues. The NHS needs to learn from these experiences about how better to engage with the public and key stakeholders, including elected local representatives.
We are fortunate in Redbridge and north-east London because there are good working relationships within the NHS and local government, and there is already a model of collaborative working. However, the problem with the STP is that it brings a top-down process into this situation and potentially undermines the joint-working that has been voluntarily established over recent years.

Redbridge along with neighbouring authorities will be strongly arguing that the developing STP governance structures should not stifle or negatively impact the local work that is happening. Redbridge and its partners in Barking and Dagenham and in Havering have over a number of years been developing cross-borough, collaborative approaches on the integration of health and social care. Redbridge is arguing that STP governance needs to ensure that this subsidiarity to the local level is taken as a model for the future, and is not undermined by the STP approach. We need to ensure democratic accountability if we are to get public buy-in, and we do not have that at present. Public engagement needs to be enhanced and improved.

The north-east London October STP draft is subtitled “transformation underpinned by system thinking and local action”. It says, however, that “the system partners may not be able to work together collaboratively to deliver the plans.”

Today we have seen news about the reality we face in our NHS: large numbers of hospitals with dangerously high bed-occupancy levels and little or no flexibility. The CQC’s chief executive recently talked about hospitals being dangerously full. On 26 November, a leaked memo from NHS England revealed that hospitals were being banned from declaring so-called “black alerts” and told to prepare for the winter crisis by passing on scheduled surgery to private hospitals and discharging thousands of patients to get bed occupancy down from a national average of 89% to 85%.

However, north-east London’s population is massively increasing. The report states that the population of north-east London boroughs will increase by 18% over the next 15 years-equivalent to a new city—and yet there is no plan for an additional hospital to cope with that change. In fact, page 20 of the draft policy states that building an additional hospital is “not practical or realistic.” Indeed, the situation is worse than that. Not only is there no extra hospital, there is the planned closure of the A&E at King George hospital in my constituency. The plan is to stop overnight ambulances sometime next year, with a total closure in 2019. The STP is calling for that not only because it would meet some savings and restructuring requirements, but also because there are unsustainable costs. The previous Health Secretary announced in 2011 that the A&E at King George would close in “around two years”. That has not happened because it was deemed unsafe and because there is insufficient capacity at Queen’s hospital in Romford or at Whipp Cross university hospital in Waltham Forest to cope with the increased demand.

Despite our excellent and hard-working staff, all the hospitals in north-east London are in crisis. With pressure for early discharges, but inadequate social care and community support, we have large-scale bed blocking and delayed discharges. Sick patients then get readmitted because they cannot get GP appointments due to the pressures that exist in that sector. The STP sees out-of-hospital and integrated community care as the way forward. However, Dame Julie Moore, who in 2014 chaired a commission on hospital care for frail elderly people, said:

“…as much as it suits us all to have one nice neat solution to the problem of our growing, ageing population… the truth is that as a catch-all answer it is simply wishful thinking. Integrated community care is a good thing... but this can never be a substitution for hospital care.”

We still need hospitals and acute care. Plans to transform care in the community are good, but that requires a transformation of primary care, which needs resourcing. The STP projects a 30% shortfall in nurses by 2021, and we know that many GPs plan to retire over the next few years. Both are difficult issues.

Problems also exist in the potential financial situation, and one such issue is the estates strategy. The STP delivery plan highlights sites such as Goodmayes hospital, which is a large mental health hospital, and King George hospital as places where land could be sold. Contractual issues and other matters mean that that is probably an optimistic approach.

Stella Creasy: My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful case about why we must involve the public in some incredibly difficult decisions. We know that the financial situation we are facing is particularly dire. He has just mentioned the sites at Goodmayes, but in addition Whipp Cross has a large private finance initiative debt, where it is paying out a huge amount of money. No wonder the suggestion is being made that we need £578 million to bridge the gap.

Mike Gapes: My hon. Friend has given the figure I was about to cite. The STP executive summary states: “Our total financial challenge in a ‘do nothing’ scenario would be £578m by 2021. Achieving ambitious ‘business as usual’ cost improvements as we have done in the past would still leave us with a funding gap of £36m by 2021.”

Those are eye-watering figures. The claim is made that “we have identified a range of opportunities and interventions to help reduce the gap significantly”.

However, the £240 million gap between the “business as usual” case model and the actual predicted figure requires a series of other measures, including significant funding from the sustainability and transformation fund, reductions and changes in specialised commissioning, and what is called “potential support for excess Public Finance Initiative (PFI) costs.”

That covers Whipp Cross hospital, Queen’s hospital, Romford, and, to some extent, King George hospital. “Potential”, what a lovely word. So this is not real and it is not even planned—it is just “potential”.

These plans are based on unrealistic, heroic, Soviet-style assumptions. This is a truly Stakhanovite model of over-estimation of potential, yet the STP still proposes it can transform a deficit of £578 million in 2021 into a potential surplus of £37 million—and improve the services. That will not happen. The plans are also predicated on totally unrealistic assumptions about savings from closing the A&E services at King George hospital, and there is a lack of clarity as to when this will happen and how much we are talking about. I have been told that tens of millions would be invested in the sites at Queen’s and
Whipps Cross, but I have been told that at least £75 million is needed to do that, and there is no sign of where this capital is coming from in the Department of Health. So wards are being closed in one hospital and then millions are being invested in rebuilding wards or constructing wards at other hospitals, for no real net gain.

There is also a problem about what process will be involved in this closure at King George hospital. I am conscious that I do not have limitless time, but let me say that my local Redbridge Council is very concerned about this, because King George is supposed to be transformed from an acute hospital into an urgent care centre and so the local community needs to be involved. Redbridge is requesting that it should be involved, and I note that it has recently been agreed that it will be involved on the transformation board. However, Redbridge wants an independent chair of that board, because it is important to involve a person of public trust so that there is no controversy. There needs to be a transparent, open process as we discuss the options for the future of King George hospital, so that we can challenge the business case and take account of the fact that the assumptions on which this model is based are 10 years old. They go back to the misnamed “Fit for the Future” plans of 2006. The population growth that we have had and the growth that is yet to come, the young population that we have in the area and the movement in population means we have to look at these issues with great doubt and concern.

We need to assess the implications of all those issues. As Redbridge says, it wants to know how the reconfiguration to an urgent care centre assists primary care, community health services, adult social care, public health, and public health prevention and education. An opportunity exists in the changes, but we need public engagement in those changes, and we do not have that at the moment.

There will be enormous pressure on my local council because of budget problems, and I am worried about the situation. I am glad that the STP highlights the social care challenge, but it needs to be taken seriously by the Government if we are truly to have an effective health and social care system. The statement in this House yesterday did not offer a solution to my borough. It did not answer the challenge that boroughs such as Redbridge are facing. These boroughs are already ahead of the game in the integration of health and adult social services and are working with neighbours to take up the challenge by being a pilot for the development of an accountable care system.

Yet with all that transformation, Redbridge still faces a huge social care challenge. That is made worse by a triple whammy of public sector funding reductions to local government—my borough has lost 40% of its income since 2010—chronic underfunding of adult social care by the Government and the fact that Redbridge does not get a fair funding level in the first place. There is, potentially, a major problem. We face a shortfall of about £4 million in social care and the 1% extra on council tax raises less than £1 million. The responses that we have heard from the Government in recent days have been inadequate—indeed they have been worse even than the silence from the Chancellor in the autumn statement. They offer no real solutions to the growing crisis that will impact on some of the most vulnerable in our society.

I conclude with this plea: please will the Government look at the situation in north-east London and will the Minister meet me to discuss the fact that this plan is unrealistic, incredible, unachievable and will lead to disaster?

2.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) on securing this important debate. He is rightly known as a fierce defender of his local NHS services, and his constituents should be proud of his record.

As both a patient with a chronic and complex illness and a daughter of a cardiologist and a nurse, I know from both sides exactly how much heart and soul our NHS workforce put into their day jobs. It is easy in debates such as this about structures and processes to lose sight of that, so I wish to begin by paying tribute to all of those who work at Barking, Havering, and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust in the constituencies of the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for their dedication, determination and commitment to providing first-class services to all those in their care. We should just take a moment to note that.

The NHS’s own plans for the future, set out in the five-year forward view, recognise three great challenges facing the NHS: health and well-being; care and quality; and finance and efficiency. The five-year forward view also recognised that challenges facing different areas of the country will inevitably be buried. The problems facing Ilford will, by definition, not be the same as those facing Ipswich, and a single national plan would not be effective or appropriate. That is why NHS England’s 2015 planning guidance called for local commissioners to come together with their providers across entire health economies to develop a collective strategy for addressing those challenges in their own areas. In much the same way, in fact, Labour’s 2015 general election manifesto on health, “A Better Plan for NHS Health and Care”, said that to reshape services over the next 10 years, the NHS will need the freedom to collaborate, integrate and merge across organisational divides. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the King’s Fund, which has been clear that we need to strengthen parts of the STP process. It will be of interest to him that Chris Ham, the chief executive, has also been clear that STPs are the only chance the NHS has to improve health and care services. We have to drive this through and we have to get it right.

All local STPs are now published and, as the hon. Gentleman said, local areas should be having conversations with local people and stakeholders including Members of Parliament to discuss and shape the proposals, understanding what matters to them and explaining how services might be improved. These conversations will inevitably gain pace over coming months and we should all want and encourage as many people as possible to get involved. Where relevant, areas should build on existing engagement through health and wellbeing boards and other existing local arrangements. They should also look for innovative ways to reach beyond those existing relationships and into local communities.

There are 44 STP areas, as the hon. Gentleman will know. They cover the whole of England, bringing together multiple commissioners and providers in a unique exercise in collaboration. That is why this is quite a challenge.
Stella Creasy: It is good to hear the Minister say that she wants to see local people involved in these plans. Will she therefore commit not just to a conversation but a consultation with teeth to give people confidence that the very difficult decisions that we all know have to be made about changing the NHS can be done with their consent, and not simply given to them as a fait accompli?

Nicola Blackwood: Perhaps if the hon. Lady lets me continue with my speech, she will hear a little more about how the process will go forward.

The geographies have been determined not by central bodies, but by what local areas have decided makes the most sense to them. In the case of the constituency of the hon. Member for Ilford South, that has involved five providers, seven CCGs and eight local authorities covering the whole of north-east London. Each area has also identified a senior leader, who has agreed to chair and lead the STP process on behalf of their peers. In north-east London it is Jane Milligan, the chief officer of Tower Hamlets CCG, who is co-ordinating the development of the plan.

I was concerned to hear what the hon. Gentleman said about local authorities not feeling as involved as they should. It is important to emphasise that local authorities must play a role in developing these plans. Reflecting the social care needs of an area, which councils are obviously best placed to represent, will be key to the success of the NHS in the coming years, so they must be closely involved.

The plans offer the NHS an opportunity to think strategically and open up the public discussion about how we will meet the challenges facing the NHS in terms of demand and rising costs. It is inevitable that debate will become heated; it is simply a reflection of how important local NHS services are for us all. By planning across multiple organisations—both commissioners and providers—STP footprints can seek to address in an holistic way the health needs of an area and all the people within it in a way that we have never had the opportunity to have before.

We all know that the NHS faces tough choices about how we will design future services to meet rising demand, rising costs, and more chronic and complex illnesses. Choices have often previously been postponed again and again because they were too hard and because the discussions are too uncomfortable. I do not think anyone in the Chamber would think it is fair or safe for our local populations for us to keep putting them off in this way.

In north-east London, as elsewhere, that has meant having an honest conversation about the best way forward for services that are unsustainable as well as how to integrate services to give patients a clearer route through the system. All those conversations will help ensure that patients maintain access to high-quality care.

As I understand it, the north-east London October STP draft looks at these challenges in a number of different ways. The hon. Gentleman has described some of them. It also proposes embracing integrated services, from urgent and emergency care to mental health care and support as well as public health, which is important to me as the Minister for Public Health. The STP is also exploring how to improve patient outcomes through community-based care and preventive measures, which must be important if we are to manage demand. For example, the proposals include utilising initiatives to provide adequate housing in the area, and using new models of care to give health education. It also highlights three enablers for change for the area—workforce, digital enablement and infrastructure—and investigates how to improve its position with each.

I share the view of the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Lady that the public, key stakeholders and elected representatives should be closely involved in the development of STPs. With the plans now published, preparation for STP implementation must begin in the new year. Now is the time for STP leaders to reach out actively and engage patients and the wider public, and I expect nothing less. That means having frank, engaging and iterative conversations across areas, as well as some potentially difficult conversations about what the NHS could and should look like. Simon Stevens and Jim Mackey—the heads of NHS England and NHS Improvement—have written an open letter to STP leaders making that expectation absolutely clear. The letter reiterated that now is the time for local engagement to help develop the proposals and for those involved to make it clear that these plans must have a real benefit to patients.

I should also be clear that, nationally, all reconfigurations must meet the four tests mandated by the Government to NHS England in 2010, which require all local reconfiguration plans to demonstrate support from GP commissioners, strong public and patient engagement, clarity on the clinical evidence base, and support for patient choice. We would not expect any proposal to move forward that has not met all four tests. Patients must be at the heart of the NHS, and no plan can be successful unless they are fully engaged.

I close by saying that the hon. Gentleman has raised some very serious questions around details of his local STP plan and the quality of public consultation. I will ask the Minister responsible for community health—the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat)—to meet him and the hon. Lady to discuss the details to ensure that they are properly ironed out and that the public consultation and discussion are of the highest possible quality.

Question put and agreed to.

3.1 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Free Childcare

1. Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): What progress her Department is making on the provision of 30 hours of free childcare to working parents. [907938]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage): We are committed to ensuring that we have the high-quality, affordable childcare that families need, and are on track to deliver 30 hours of childcare to working parents. We are investing record funding of £1 billion per year by 2020 and have announced a fairer early-years funding system. Eight early implementer areas are already providing nearly 4,000 places one year early.

Andrew Bingham: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Last week I visited Hadfield Nursery School in my constituency. That excellent and very well respected local nursery is a maintained nursery. It is concerned about the level of funding it will receive when the 30 hours provision comes in. Will she give us some reassurance on that, and would she like to visit Hadfield Nursery School, because it does a great job and everyone there would be delighted to see her?

Caroline Dinenage: I thank my hon. Friend for that very kind invitation. I would be more than happy to visit both him and the Hadfield Nursery School in his beautiful High Peak constituency. He is right to highlight the importance of maintained nursery schools. We have committed to providing local authorities with an additional £55 million per year for nursery schools until at least the end of this Parliament.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): On the same subject, is it not really the case that the 30 hour promise is being funded by stealing resources from state-run nurseries that employ fully qualified headteachers and staff? Will the Secretary of State tell us what analysis she has undertaken of the damage that will be done by the cuts she is making to the funding of state-run nursery schools?

Caroline Dinenage: That is a rather churlish comment, if you do not mind my saying so, Mr Speaker. We are investing more money in this policy than any Government have ever spent on it before, some £6 billion. The hon. Gentleman needs to be a little more appreciative.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I assure the Minister that working parents in my constituency very much welcome 30 hours of free childcare for their children. Will she set them out for, and in particular for those with disabled children, how she will make sure there will be sufficient funding to give disabled children the best start in life through that 30 hours scheme?

Caroline Dinenage: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was at Sheringham Nursery School in Newham last week, which is an early implementer and is already seeing the massive difference the scheme is making to working families. There is an inclusion fund that will go to children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I hope the Minister agrees that the early-years pupil premium provides vital support to some of our most disadvantaged children. Like the hon. Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham), we know that nurseries are facing financial pressure now, and many worry that they will not be able to care for the most vulnerable children when the 30 hours scheme is introduced. Will she therefore guarantee that all of the £50 million early-years pupil premium money will go to our most vulnerable children, and that that vital resource will not be cut this Parliament?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes. The pupil premium, which we introduced, will continue and will continue to go to the most vulnerable children.

Good and Outstanding Schools: Places

2. Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve the number of available places in good and outstanding schools. [907939]

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): We are committed to making sure that as many children as possible have a good place at school. The latest Ofsted annual report clearly shows that standards have risen compared with 2010, with almost 1.8 million more pupils now taught in good or outstanding schools. Proposals on additional measures to increase the supply of good new school places are set out in the “Schools that work for everyone” consultation.

Wendy Morton: I welcome that very encouraging reply from the Secretary of State. One issue raised with me by constituents and school governors is securing school places for siblings so that brothers and sisters can attend the same school. Will my right hon. Friend look at that as part of her plans to improve the number of places available?

Justine Greening: Any changes to the overall operation of the code would of course be scrutinised by this House. My hon. Friend will probably be aware that admissions authorities are responsible for setting their own admissions arrangements, but the code already allows them to prioritise siblings, and some admissions authorities already choose to do so.
Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Headteachers in my constituency tell me that their efforts to get their schools to become good or outstanding are sometimes stymied by changing expectations from Government and changes that they feel are not evidence-based. Will the Secretary of State reassure headteachers in Bristol West that expectations will not keep changing without a very good reason?

**Justine Greening:** I had a chance to visit a Bristol school last week, which was a fantastic opportunity. That school is working with Bristol University. On our continued reforms, we want to make sure that we see improvements in classrooms. The hon. Lady will no doubt welcome our recent launch of the strategic school improvement fund. That fund is about making sure we can get the investment to schools that need to improve quickly and effectively.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Good and outstanding secondary school provision must include the provision of technical and professional education, which is essential for our skills base for the future. Does the Secretary of State agree that university technical colleges play a really important role in that and can and should be good or outstanding?

**Justine Greening:** I agree. As with all schools, we expect them to deliver high standards. I had the chance recently to go to Didcot UTC, which provides a fantastic education—a very different education perhaps, but one that works for them and their interests. It is getting very good results because of that.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is my understanding that in the past two years, over 60 schools have been rated inadequate where an academy order has been issued but a sponsor has yet to be identified. How does that uncertainty help to improve standards in those schools?

**Justine Greening:** We are committed to ensuring, where we see schools not achieving the results they need for their children, that we have a strong approach that steadily improves the schools and works with them to improve. Where they cannot improve, we want to ensure that, through academisation, changes take place in terms of leadership and school sponsorship that mean schools have the flexibility and the freedom to be able to get better.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): As a former Acton resident, the Secretary of State will I am sure share the concern of local parents that the Ark primary school—secured with much fanfare in East Acton to match its near neighbour—which has an outstanding reputation—now has a full roll of students and a secured site but no physical building. Will she do everything she can to pressure the education funding authority to find the shortfall that Balfour Beatty wants for its bid price? East Acton is the most deprived ward of Ealing borough. It is in the bottom decile for the whole country and—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Lady has made her point with great force and eloquence, but it does not need to be made at any greater length.

**Justine Greening:** As the hon. Lady recognises, I very much enjoyed living in Acton. It is important to raise standards in Acton schools. I will look very carefully at the particular issue she raises and perhaps write to her to find out what we can do to speed things up.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Easingwold school in my constituency—I must declare an interest as two of my children attend this school, but so do 1,000 other children—has been placed in special measures and will now, of course, become an academy, which I support. The choice of academy has been announced and subsequently retracted, pending surveys of the school. Clearly, either the process is flawed or the way this has been handled is flawed. Will the Secretary of State look at this matter urgently to resolve these problems?

**Justine Greening:** I am aware of this matter, because my hon. Friend has played his role as a fantastic local MP and already raised it with me. The Department is looking to see whether we can make sure the barriers preventing the school from getting a great sponsor that will help to improve it, not just for his own children but for all the children, can be quickly removed.

**Special Needs Schools Multi-academy Trusts**

3. **James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of special needs schools multi-academy trusts.

**The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families** (Edward Timpson): Multi-academy trusts enable the sharing of staff and expertise that can help to foster truly excellent special educational needs provision. Special schools can be successful both in multi-academy trusts that specialise wholly in supporting children with special education needs, as well as in multi-academy trusts that offer special provision alongside mainstream provision. Some examples of multi-academy trusts that offer special provision can be found in our new good practice guidance, published on 9 December.

**James Duddridge:** I was going to ask the Minister to issue further guidance. I do not think the 9 December guidance had been issued when I tabled the question, so I am grateful for that and encourage him to look at special needs schools operating within multi-academy trusts solely as special needs schools. There is an enormous difference in special needs schools between thousands of pupils and hundreds of pupils.

**Mr Speaker:** I hope the hon. Gentleman is encouraged by the power of his own question tabling.

**Edward Timpson:** I expect nothing less from my hon. Friend in terms of the pressure he is able to bring to bear on the Government. He raises an important issue. We continue to support and provide guidance for the growing number of MATs in this area. I encourage any newly forming MATs to get in touch with their regional schools commissioner, who will be able to support them and help to direct them towards further sources of support.
**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I thank the Minister for meeting me a few weeks ago to discuss the contents of my ten-minute rule Bill on special needs and, in particular, on the admission of autistic children to schools. He mentioned at that time that the arrangements were not ideal and needed some adjustment. He mentioned a consultation. Can he please give us any more information on that?

**Edward Timpson**: I welcome my hon. Friend’s private Member’s Bill and have a lot of sympathy for the cause it enshrines. I can commit to a consultation early in the new year, and I know that he and others who are interested in this issue will want to contribute.

### Improving Educational Outcomes

4. **Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): What steps is her Department taking to support teachers in improving educational outcomes?

**The Secretary of State for Education** (Justine Greening): Great teachers are critical to improving educational outcomes. Teaching is a profession, and we support the professional development of teachers, including through the new £74.2 million teaching and leadership innovation fund and the new charter college of teaching. We are also investing in improving curriculum expertise and specialism, particularly in maths, which I saw for myself first hand on a recent visit to Shanghai, China.

**Lucy Frazer**: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. In “Education Excellence Everywhere”, a paper produced in March 2016, there was a good proposal for a free national teacher vacancy website to ensure that the costs of recruitment were kept down for schools. What progress is the Secretary of State making on that proposal?

**Justine Greening**: My hon. and learned Friend mentions the commitment we made in the March White Paper to a website offering a free route for schools to advertise teacher vacancies and, in doing so, providing teachers with easier access to information about job opportunities. We have worked closely with schools and teachers, and we are testing out different approaches to how to deliver that website most effectively, so we can make sure that it will be of maximum value to all schools.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Whenever I meet young people in my constituency, they tell me that the thing that could most affect their educational outcomes is a curriculum for life and compulsory personal, social and health education in all schools. The curriculum is inadequate, having been last updated before Facebook was even invented, and teachers go unsupported and untrained. If yesterday’s briefings to the newspapers are to be believed, the Government are considering bringing in compulsory PSHE. Is this true and, if so, when will it happen? It is urgent.

**Justine Greening**: I was very clear in my first Education Committee appearance that I felt this was an area that we needed actively to look at, which is what we are doing. It is not just a question of updating the guidance; it is about the schools where it is taught—and, I would say, the quality of the teaching that happens as well.

14. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): As someone who did pure maths and applied maths, as well as physics and English at A-level, I am very keen on mathematics teaching, and I was just wondering what is the Secretary of State’s assessment of the recent mathematics teacher exchange between the United Kingdom and China.

**Justine Greening**: I think it has worked fantastically well so far. Over the last two years, we have seen 131 teachers from England visiting Shanghai and 127 teachers from Shanghai visiting English schools, and through that exchange our teachers have observed Shanghai teaching methods. In the 48 schools participating in the study, the teachers have implemented changes, which have led to increased enthusiasm for mathematics—hopefully as strong as my hon. Friend’s was at school—deeper engagement, increased confidence and, critically, higher attainment.

**Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): One of the best ways to support teachers in improving educational outcomes, particularly for children with special needs, is through the pupil premium. Will the Secretary of State therefore explain why the level of the pupil premium has been frozen at current levels through this Parliament?

**Justine Greening**: The pupil premium was introduced by the previous coalition Government and it is continuing to be supported throughout this Parliament precisely to make sure that funding gets to those children who need it most. Last week, I announced the national funding formula, which also prioritises resources going towards disadvantaged children.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Secretary of State will know how traumatic it is for students and teachers to get children through GCSE maths and English resits, which can often blight their post-GCSE studies. Can we have a curriculum that is vocationally based for numeracy and literacy, which would give people the skills they need for work—without having to go through this traumatic and often wasteful experience?

**Justine Greening**: It is important that all children leave our education system with something to show for their names, particularly in maths and English—ideally at a level congruent with their potential. We brought in the GCSE resit policy, because we think that students who achieved a D grade and were therefore pretty close to the better standard should have another go at doing so. However, the functional skills qualifications have been well received by employers and we want to look at how they can also play a role in enabling all our young people to show their accomplishments.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Grammar schools represent the Prime Minister’s flagship policy for improving outcomes, but according to today’s edition of *The Independent*, officials in the Department have said that there is no chance of a new selective school before 2020. Will the Secretary of State tell us how many selective schools will be built during the current Parliament?
Teacher Shortages

5. Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What assessment she has made of trends in the level of teacher shortages.

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): The school workforce census reports a fairly constant vacancy rate of 0.2% of teachers in post. New analysis, published in September, of the proportion of schools with at least one vacancy showed some variation between regions since 2010, with London consistently having the highest proportion of vacancies. The Department is trying to identify the schools that are experiencing the greatest teacher shortages and help them to meet those challenges.

Bridget Phillipson: Good teaching depends on retaining good teachers in the profession. Does the Minister not accept that the consistent underfunding of schools in disadvantaged areas such as the north-east makes retaining teachers very difficult? Will he look again at the area cost adjustment of the national funding formula, which could well have the perverse effect of sending money away from disadvantaged areas and into more affluent ones?

Mr Gibb: We have protected the core schools budget in real terms throughout this Parliament and the last. Moreover, we have grasped the nettle and introduced fair funding, which the Labour party failed to do throughout its time in office. One of the elements of that fair funding is ensuring that there are sufficient funds to tackle disadvantage and lower prior attainment.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Schools in Somerset have great teachers, but find it hard to recruit. Does my hon. Friend agree that adjusting the funding formula will help rural areas such as mine to attract and retain excellent teachers?

Mr Gibb: My hon. Friend is right. Authorities around the country, particularly those in the f40 group, have been underfunded for many years. As I said to the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), we were the first Government to grasp the nettle and introduce a much fairer system to replace those historic, anachronistic and unfair national funding formulas.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Following last week’s announcement of the proposed funding formula, may I ask the Minister how it will help us to recruit and retain teachers, given that all but one of the secondary schools in my constituency will lose money as a result of the formula?

Mr Gibb: The national funding formula has been introduced to ensure that we have a fair funding system. We shall be consulting on that fair funding system over the next 14 weeks, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will send in his representations.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If an outstanding academy in the New Forest, minutes from the seaside, is finding it difficult to recruit an English teacher, what hope is there for schools anywhere else?

Mr Gibb: My right hon. Friend has raised an important point. The national fair funding formula will help schools to acquire the resources that will enable them to use the discretion that we have given them in respect of how they reward teachers, especially teachers of certain subjects whom it is difficult to recruit.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): May I take this opportunity to wish the House Nollaig Chridheil agus Bliadhna Mhath Ùir?

The Association of School and College Leaders has warned that opening new grammar schools may worsen teacher recruitment. Does the Minister not think that priority should be given to incentivising teacher recruitment and retention, rather than taking the retrograde step of providing new grammars that will do nothing for teachers, pupils or parents?

Mr Gibb: We are prioritising teacher recruitment. We met 94% of our target last year and 93% this year, and we are recruiting more teachers in sciences than before. I think that the hon. Lady should take account of the number of teachers who are entering teacher training. She should also acknowledge that there are 456,000 teachers in our schools today, which is an all-time high, and that there are 15,000 more teachers today than there were in 2010.

Careers Advice

6. Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): What steps her Department is taking to prepare young people for their future careers.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): May I take this opportunity to thank the hon. Gentleman for the work he does in the all-party group on education?

Helping all young people to get the careers education and guidance they need to climb the ladder of opportunity is crucial to delivering real social mobility, and that is why we are investing £90 million over the Parliament to ensure that every young person has access to advice and inspiration to fulfill their potential. This includes further funding for the Careers & Enterprise Company to continue the excellent work it has started, including £1 million for the first six opportunity areas.

Danny Kinahan: I thank the Minister for that answer. The all-party group on education is conducting an inquiry into how we prepare young children for the careers of the future, and specifically that seems to require not just the academic skills, but the also the soft skills. Do the Government feel they are doing that ably
enough, or are there to be changes? Also, will the Minister attend the launch of our document when it is produced on 7 February?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point: not enough schools are encouraging their children to do not just soft skills, but all skills, and technical education and apprenticeships. We are working hard to change that. We have made sure that schools have to talk about apprenticeships and skills when giving careers advice. As I have said, we are investing many millions of pounds into the Careers & Enterprise Company, which is going to look after 250,000 students in some of the areas of the country that have the least careers provision. We are doing everything we can. In terms of the important event the hon. Gentleman mentions, I will do my best to attend, but will have to check the diary.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): The Minister is right: the introduction of the Careers & Enterprise Company will do a great deal to improve careers advice among secondary school students. However, to encourage more girls into a science, technology, engineering and maths career we have to start earlier, in primary schools. Can he confirm that increasing diversity in STEM careers that lead to greater productivity will form a central part of the STEM-related industrial strategy, and will he work with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to do so?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is right: we need to do everything possible to ensure that young people do STEM subjects and that we encourage them to do so. That is why we are investing a lot in STEM apprenticeships. It is also why the get in, go far campaign focuses heavily on STEM subjects and encourages more women to do apprenticeships and to have the skills we need.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am glad to hear the Minister’s support for young people studying STEM subjects. Does he therefore share my disappointment that GCSEs in environmental science and environmental and land-based science have now been discontinued?

Robert Halfon: There are alternative qualifications, but I would add that we are creating a state-of-the-art technical education system with 15 different pathways, which will have important technical routes and qualifications. They will have prestige and give employers the qualifications they need.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Minister knows that university technical colleges can be a fantastic route into apprenticeships, degrees and jobs. The proposed Gloucestershire university health UTC will be a magnificent example of this, but when will the delayed deadline for UTC applications be announced?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of UTCs, and he has been an incredible champion of apprenticeships and skills in his own constituency since being elected. I will speak to my noble Friend Lord Nash, the UTC Minister, about the specific question he raises.

Leaving the EU: Funding for Further Education

7. Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): What assessment she has made of the effect on further education institutions of the potential loss of access to the (a) European social fund and (b) European regional development fund after the UK leaves the EU. [907948]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): Following the European Union referendum on 23 June we are considering all aspects of how the vote of the people of the UK to leave the EU might impact on further education institutions. This includes consideration of institutions’ access to EU funding sources. We are committed to ensuring the FE sector remains effective in delivering learning that provides individuals with the skills the economy needs for growth.

Natalie McGarry: The Chancellor of the Exchequer has committed to stability and certainty in the period leading up to our departure from the EU. Further education institutions in Glasgow—including Glasgow Kelvin College in my constituency—and across the UK will need that certainty in any post-Brexit scenario. Those colleges have benefited from European social funding to the tune of £1.5 million this year alone. Brexit was not a matter of Scotland’s choosing or of Glasgow’s choosing. Will the Government commit to abandoning the empty “Brexit means Brexit” rhetoric, publishing detailed plans, providing certainty and standing by our colleges on funding?

Robert Halfon: Leaving the European Union will mean that we will want to take our own decisions on how to deliver the policy objectives previously targeted by EU funding. The Government are consulting closely with stakeholders to review all EU funding schemes in the round, to ensure that any ongoing funding commitments best serve the UK’s national interest while ensuring appropriate certainty.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Given that all EU spending in Britain is simply returning part of our gross contribution to the EU budget, would it not be sensible for the Government simply to commit now to replacing EU funding with UK Exchequer funding, thereby keeping everyone happy?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. As I have just said, the fact that the British people voted to leave the EU means that the United Kingdom Government will decide how best to spend the money that was previously going to the European Union.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Colleges Scotland has received more than £250 million in EU funding in the past 10 years to help fund capital projects. Given that it was this Government who gambled away Scotland’s EU membership, what is the likelihood of their replacing this type of vital funding in the years ahead?

Robert Halfon: I find it interesting, given that the hon. Lady’s party’s position is to campaign for more powers to go from Westminster to Scotland, that she would rather have funding decisions made by an authority in the European Union than by one in Scotland. Having
said that, she will know that the Chancellor has announced that the Treasury will guarantee structural and investment funding bids that are signed before the UK leaves the EU. This includes funding for projects agreed after the autumn statement, provided that they represent good value for money and are in line with the Government’s strategic priorities, even if they continue beyond the UK’s departure from the EU.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Our further education colleges benefit hugely from European structural funds such as the European social fund, as has been mentioned. The Government told me in February that the Skills Funding Agency had received £725 million from the European social fund, and that in 2014-15, £120 million went directly to FE colleges from European funding. That money guarantees thousands of apprenticeships, jobs and new skills. Can the Minister guarantee that the Government will replace that £120 million after Brexit? Will FE colleges that provide higher education courses then get the same Government guarantees on replacement funding as universities?

Robert Halfon: I had hoped that, in the spirit of Christmas, the hon. Gentleman might have welcomed the 900,000 apprenticeship participation figure, the highest on record in our island’s history. As I have said, access to European funding is just one aspect of college business and will be impacted by the decision to leave the European Union. We are considering all the aspects of how FE colleges could be affected. It is also worth noting that, by 2020, the adult FE budget will be the highest in the nation’s history if we include apprenticeships and adult learner loans in the budget as a whole.

Apprenticeships

8. John Howell (Henley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help people from disadvantaged backgrounds to take up apprenticeships.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): All this getting up and down is good practice for Christmas—

Mr Speaker: Order. If the Minister knows that he is going to answer the next question, he is very welcome to remain standing at the Dispatch Box. No one would think that there was anything disorderly or unreasonable about that, and he should feel welcome to do so.

Robert Halfon: Thank you, Mr Speaker, but it is good for the calories in advance of Christmas.

We are committed to ensuring that apprenticeships are as accessible as possible to all people from all backgrounds, and we are making available more than £60 million to support apprenticeship take-up by individuals from disadvantaged areas. Our get in, go far campaign aims to encourage more young people to apply for an apprenticeship and more employers to offer opportunities. We are increasing the number of traineeships to further support young people into apprenticeships and other work.

John Howell: What measures is the Minister putting in place to overcome the barriers to accessing apprenticeships and to ensure that schools’ promotion of apprenticeships is good?

Robert Halfon: I mentioned that we are putting £60 million into deprived areas to encourage trainers to take apprentices from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. We are putting a lot of funding into helping 16 to 18-year-olds into apprenticeships by supporting businesses and providers. We are supporting health and social care apprenticeships if the local authority has a health and social care plan. We are also supporting apprentices with disabilities and giving £12 million to the Union Learning Fund. This Government are committed to ensuring that the most disadvantaged people can do apprenticeships and get on the ladder of opportunity for the jobs and skills of the future.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): From next April, many schools will have to pay the apprenticeship levy—yet another cost. For one Hounslow school, it will mean an additional cost of £15,000. Will the Minister agree to meet me, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and concerned headteachers in Hounslow to discuss the levy’s impact on schools and academies?

Robert Halfon: I am of course happy to meet the hon. Lady, but the whole idea of the apprenticeship levy is to change behaviours and ensure that we become an apprenticeship and skills nation. If the school that she describes has apprentices that meet the needs of the levy, not only will they not pay any levy but they will get 10% on top.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Small businesses often give apprentices the best experience, but they find it difficult to offer the time and resources to support them. What steps is the Minister taking to encourage small businesses in particular to take on more apprentices?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is a champion of small business, both in his constituency and in the House. We are doing huge amounts to support small businesses to take on young apprentices, including a huge financial incentive for both providers and businesses. Very small businesses do not have to pay any training costs if they have 16 to 18-year-olds. We have also cut national insurance contributions for employers when apprentices are aged under 25.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The apprenticeship scheme must be and should be better publicised both in high schools and, I suggest, in primary schools to encourage those who do not feel comfortable in academia to understand that other options are available. Will the Minister specify how the Department plans to implement any such publication system in schools?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, as he so often does. Wherever I go around the country to meet apprentices, I often find that they have not been encouraged by their schools. We are looking hard at how to ensure that careers guidance encourages skills apprenticeships and technical education. As I said, we are investing £90 million in careers, including in the Careers & Enterprise Company, which has some 1,300 advisers in schools around the country getting kids to do work experience and acquire the skills they need.
9. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What plans the Government have to respond to the independent review by Sir Nick Weller, “A Northern Powerhouse Schools Strategy”, published in November 2016. [907951]

**The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb):** We are committed to tackling educational inequality so that all pupils can fulfil their potential. We welcome the important contribution that Sir Nick Weller’s report is making towards delivering that objective, including its recognition of the benefits of an academic curriculum and robust governance structures.

**Diana Johnson:** Northern schools have been improving, but there is more to do. A northern powerhouse challenge that is as well funded as the London Challenge programme was under the Labour Government would be welcome for schools such as the McMllan Nursery School in my constituency—an outstanding school led by an excellent headteacher, Andrew Shimmin, and his staff. What support will be available to schools such as that, which is already doing its best in a disadvantaged area?

**Mr Gibb:** As Sir Nick’s report shows, there is an achievement gap between the north and the south, which is why the Chancellor announced in the March 2016 Budget £70 million of new funding between now and 2020 to support a northern powerhouse schools strategy.

**Mr Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): The Minister knows that Trafford is the best performing local authority area in the north of England, yet it is also one of the f40 group of worst-funded authorities. I am sure he can imagine the concern that last week’s draft funding formula will lead to all secondary schools and a number of primary schools being worse off. Will he look at the nature of the funding formula as a matter of urgency to ensure real fairness to those authorities that have been underfunded?

**Mr Gibb:** Overall, f40 authorities will see significant gains through the national funding formula—some £210 million in total. I acknowledge that in Trafford there is a loss of 0.4%, but the current local formula underfunds primary schools compared with secondary schools. Trafford gives £4,212 for each key stage 3 pupil but the figure for primaries is only £2,642. Under the proposed NFF, Trafford’s secondary schools will lose but its primaries will gain.

**John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): The Education Policy Institute found that academy trusts are no better at raising standards than local authorities, so why does Nick Weller’s report say that expanding multi-academy trusts is “key to driving up standards in the North”?

Is it because he is very well paid by a multi-academy trust, or is there perchance any evidence for what he suggests?

**Mr Gibb:** It is because he is experienced in running a very successful MAT. We know that sponsored academies increase standards very rapidly, certainly more swiftly than the predecessor school.

10. **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Whether her Department has closed any state secondary schools within three years of their conversion to a single trust academy. [907952]

**The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening):** We have not permanently closed any converter academies within three years of their conversion to a single trust academy. However, we have rebrokered or merged converter academies.

**Steve McCabe:** If no school has been closed within three years of such a conversion and no academy closed solely as a result of a bad Ofsted report, and if there is no reliable estimate of the costs of closure or of the availability of alternative places, future demand, real travel patterns and journey times to alternative schools, how do the Government justify reneging on their promise to pupils and parents to rescue Baverstock Academy in my constituency, rather than close their school?

**Justine Greening:** No decision has been taken yet by Ministers on the future of Baverstock Academy, which has twice now been put into special measures by Ofsted. Ministers are going to consider all options, and of course the view of parents and the community, before reaching a final decision. The key factor will be ensuring that children get good access to a good education.

**Increasing Educational Opportunity**

12. **Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase educational opportunity for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. [907954]

**The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening):** Increasing educational opportunity for disadvantaged pupils underpins our commitment to make sure that our country works for everyone, and through the pupil premium, worth £2.5 billion this year alone, we are narrowing the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. That can be seen in Eversley Primary School in Enfield, and I want to take this opportunity to congratulate it on its excellent work on the pupil premium and on winning the high aspiration award.

**Mr Burrowes:** I thank the Secretary of State for that response, recognising the great work of Eversley school, among others, in my borough. I wish to draw on the responses from my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills and touch on the “Getting ready for work” report. Given that school links with
local employers have let down the most vulnerable, in particular, may I commend to the Secretary of State the good example of Transport for London’s Steps into Work programme, which is bucking the national trend; instead of only 6% of those with learning disabilities getting into work, some 57% are doing so.

**Justine Greening:** I am aware of that programme, and indeed as part of our opportunities area work we are working with both the CBI and the Careers & Enterprise Company to strengthen links between employers and schools. The TIL programme shows how, when we get a closer relationship between employers, local schools and young people, especially those with learning disabilities, it can really make a difference in employment rates.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State must know that there is a serious problem whereby disadvantaged young people are identified to be clever and bright up to the age of 11, in good primary schools, but then we lose them and they fail in secondary. I know she is reluctant ever to answer a question about skills and apprenticeships, but is she also aware of how many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are locked into the further education system, unable to get their GCSEs in maths and English? When is she going to do something about that? We are talking about tens of thousands of young people.

**Justine Greening:** At key stage 4, the attainment gap between more disadvantaged young people and those who start off from better backgrounds has been getting lower. That is, in part, because we are putting resources into the system, but we are also steadily improving the system itself. The hon. Gentleman talks about further education: one of our key aims across this Parliament is to make sure that technical education delivers the same gold-standard education as academic education delivers for those following academic routes.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): In answer to my earlier question, the Secretary of State failed to commit to building a new selective school during this Parliament. Today the Education Policy Institute has released evidence showing that the 11-plus test cannot be tutor-proofed. Does she agree that selection at 11 will favour families that can afford it and do nothing to improve the educational outcomes of the most disadvantaged pupils?

**Justine Greening:** I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. As usual, we have had criticism from the Opposition, but no alternative policies whatever—and, indeed, a continued failure to set out whether they would close existing grammar schools. It would be fantastic to get clarity at some stage on Labour party policy. We want more good school places for children, particularly disadvantaged children. We know that disadvantaged children on free school meals who get into grammars see their attainment gap close by the time they leave.

**Times Tables**

13. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): By what age pupils are expected to know the times tables up to 12; and what proportion of children of that age in (a) Northamptonshire and (b) England know those times tables.

**The Minister for School Standards** (Mr Nick Gibb): The new national curriculum that came into force in September 2014 expects every pupil to know their multiplication tables to 12 times 12 by the end of year 4.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): One hundred and forty-four!

**Mr Gibb:** Well done! We have strengthened primary maths assessment to prioritise fluency in written calculation and we have removed the use of calculators from key stage 2 tests.

We have not made an assessment of the proportion of children in Northamptonshire or England who know their multiplication tables by heart, but we have pledged to introduce a multiplication tables check for primary school pupils in England to ensure that every child leaves primary school fluent in their times tables up to and including 12 times 12, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) says, is 144.

**Mr Speaker:** We are all very much better informed.

**Mr Hollobone:** Does the Minister agree that learning the times tables is an absolutely essential part of success at maths? What is the Government’s official view on the best way for times tables to be taught and learned?

**Mr Gibb:** We do not have an official way for times tables to be taught, but we expect every child to know their tables. The provision is inserted into year 4 so that children are fluent in their tables, can recall them with automaticity and can then tackle long multiplication and long division in years 5 and 6.

**Physical Exercise in Schools**

15. **David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage physical exercise in schools.

**The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families** (Edward Timpson): We want all pupils to be healthy and active and have the opportunity to engage in sport and physical activity. That is why physical education remains a compulsory subject at all four key stages in the national curriculum. Since 2013, we have given more than £600 million directly to primary schools to improve the breadth and quality of PE and sport provision; that will double to £320 million a year from 2017.

**David Rutley:** Given the urgent need to tackle child obesity and physical inactivity, will my hon. Friend say what steps he is taking to work with organisations such as ukactive, the Outdoor Industry Association and The Daily Mile foundation, as well as local organisations such as Active Cheshire, to follow the example of Upton Priory School, where my daughter goes, to take forward more Daily Mile initiatives?

**Edward Timpson:** As a fellow Cheshire MP, I am aware of some of the excellent work that local schools and local groups, such as Active Cheshire, do in partnership. We welcome initiatives such as the Daily Mile, and I will be meeting the foundation in the new year. They all help teachers who have the autonomy to make good decisions on behalf of their pupils to have an array of excellent quality initiatives to use. We continue to promote those through county sport partnerships.
Mr Speaker: The Minister is too modest in declining to take the opportunity to say that he has, over many years, led by example through his repeated and impressive marathon running, with which the whole House should by now be well familiar.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Physical activity is really important to equip the next generation with the skills to contend with both their physical and mental health. Alone, however, it will not contend with our nation’s obesity crisis; we know from the child measurement figures how challenging that issue is for our country. Will the Government be bringing forward compulsory personal, social, health and economic education so that we can equip the next generation with the knowledge and skills to know what they should be eating as well as what physical activity they should be doing?

Edward Timpson: I have already told the House that PE is compulsory at all four key stages. The Secretary of State has set out the need to improve the access to, and the quality of, PSHE, and we are continuing to look at that very carefully. Just to stop the press, I will be taking part in the London marathon again next year to continue my efforts to lead by example.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is genuinely a hero in his own times.

Topical Questions

T1. [907927] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): May I, too, wish everybody in the House a happy Christmas?

The latest Ofsted figures show that there are now nearly 1.8 million more children being taught in good or outstanding schools than in 2010. Our Schools that Work for Everyone consultation has now ended, and we look forward to responding to that in due course. In the past few weeks, we have announced a £140 million strategic school improvement fund and published the next stage of the consultation on our national fairer funding formula for schools across England, which will finally bring an end to the historical postcode lottery and support our aspiration for all children to be able to reach their potential and succeed in adult life. There is often little or no justification for the differences that local areas and schools get at the moment. The consultation is now under way, and I have no doubt that hon. Members on both sides of the House will want to respond to it.

Angela Rayner: The former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), is the most recent senior Conservative to say that the Prime Minister’s plans to include international students in migration figures are not sensible. Will the Secretary of State join the Opposition and commit to doing everything she can to reverse this foolish policy and to ensure that students are removed from the migration statistics?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): We value the very significant contribution that international students make to our universities. We welcome them, and we have no plans to introduce a cap on intake. As the Secretary of State recently announced, we will shortly be seeking views on the study immigration route, and all interested parties, including the Opposition, should ensure their point of view is heard.

T2. [907928] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Getting it right early on is so crucial for life chances. Pen Green in Corby offers flagship nursery provision and early intervention, which local families very much appreciate and value. Would the Minister be willing to come and visit Pen Green, or to meet representatives of it, to discuss how the funding reforms can best support this provision?
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage): Maintained nursery schools are a very small but very important part of the early years sector, providing high-quality childcare and education often in areas of disadvantage. They have a potentially important role in shaping best practice with other providers in their area. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend (Caroline Dinenage):

T3. [907929] Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that many schools, including the primary school in the most deprived part of my constituency that contacted me on Wednesday, are struggling financially as a result of, among other things, the overheads that are being heaped on them, and that children with special educational needs are likely to suffer most from the financial squeeze?

Justine Greening: In fact, under the national funding formula that we announced last week in relation to starting the consultation on high needs, no local areas will lose out. Indeed, we have been able not only to do that but to ensure that the areas that have been underfunded will be able to gain up to 3% over 2018-19 and 2019-20.

T5. [907932] David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Following the publication of the key stage SATs results on Thursday, we saw that whereas the national average pass rate was 54% and the Lancashire pass rate was 54%, the pass rate in my constituency was 47%. What steps are the Department taking to look at best practice in schools such as those in my constituency with a pass rate of 78%, and what can it do to help the schools that are underperforming?

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): I share my hon. Friend’s justifiable concern. We want all schools to use evidence-based teaching such as systematic synthetic phonics and maths mastery. To help spread effective practice, we have established a national network of teaching schools, as well as school partnerships led by schools that excel in the teaching of maths, phonics, and science.

T4. [907931] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): International students are vital to the economy, contributing about £7 billion, according to Universities UK. Will the Minister confirm whether this Government plan to use the new teaching and excellence framework to link student visas to the quality of course and institution as a means of cutting immigration?

Joseph Johnson: No decision has yet been taken on the best way to differentiate in order to allow our best institutions to continue to attract international students. The Home Secretary has indicated that she will start a consultation in the new year, and all parties are encouraged to contribute to it.

T8. [907935] David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): Recognising the mental health challenges faced by an increasing number of young people, what steps is my hon. Friend taking to work with third sector bodies such as YoungMinds and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to help young people and their parents to tackle self-harming, which is blighting the lives of too many children?

The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families (Edward Timpson): Every child and young person should be able to enjoy good mental health and well-being. My hon. Friend is right to raise the serious concerns about self-harm. That is why we are working closely with the Department of Health to tackle it by funding guidance for schools on teaching about it, and information and training for professionals and parents through the MindEd web portal, as well as providing funding to the YoungMinds parents’ helpline and to the NSPCC’s invaluable Childline. However, we know that there is more to do.

T6. [907933] Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The higher education sector in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland supported SNP amendments to the Higher Education and Research Bill to ensure fair, UK-wide representation on the board of UK Research and Innovation. Does the Secretary of State have any plans to look at this issue again, or is she happy to ignore the respected HE voices within the devolved nations?

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman will have seen the amendment that the Government tabled to the Bill ensuring that there will be at least one member of the UKRI board with experience of the excellent research that goes on in at least one of our devolved Administrations.

T7. [907934] Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Universities such as Sunderland do a fantastic job in supporting part-time and mature students into higher education. Ministers claim to want to support this, so why was funding for widening participation cut by 50% in the autumn statement?

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Lady will be encouraged to see that spending on access agreements will increase to some £800 million in the next financial year, up from about £400 million when the previous coalition Government came into office, almost doubling the amount being spent on this important area.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The Secretary of State will remember the historical and ongoing problems with flooding at Tipton St John Primary School. Will she announce an early Christmas present for the people of Tipton St John and of Ottery St Mary by announcing that her Department is going to contribute to the funding solution to relocate the school to Ottery St Mary?

Mr Gibb: Following my right hon. Friend’s meeting on 12 October with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and county representatives to consider plans to relocate the school, a feasibility study was submitted to the Education Funding Agency. Officials have reviewed the report and have been in dialogue with Devon County Council to address outstanding issues. Once those are resolved, a decision can be taken about whether any central funding contribution can be made, and whether my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) will have a Christmas present.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Given the contribution of EU nationals to the overall numbers of teachers and lecturers, what contingency plans do Ministers have should that source of recruitment diminish?
Joseph Johnson: As I said in an earlier answer, this Government welcome strongly the contribution that EU and international students make to our higher education institutions. There is no plan to introduce a cap on the number of international students. We continue to welcome EU students.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The superb schools across my constituency of Wealden face the double financial whammy of being both rural and small. Under the new funding formula, only eight schools will get an uplift. May I urge Ministers to look again at the schools in Wealden that do not regularly hit the traditional markers of deprivation?

Justine Greening: We have kicked off a consultation on introducing a national funding formula. As my hon. Friend points out, we have tried to make sure that it reflects factors that affect schools in more remote locations, as well as those with higher cost bases under the additional costs allowance. She has obviously looked at the impacts on her local schools and I am sure that she will want to provide input into the consultation.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Last Tuesday, more than 2,000 people filled Nottingham’s royal concert hall to hear hundreds of schoolchildren singing and playing together in the Nottingham Music Service “Christmas in the City” concert. Does the Secretary of State agree that the opportunity to learn to play music is hugely important in building children’s confidence and their enjoyment of school, and will she visit Nottingham Music Service to hear more about the wonderful work it is doing in our city schools, where more than 8,000 students are learning to play a musical instrument?

Justine Greening: We have announced £300 million for music and the arts. As someone who had the chance to play music during my school years, I know how important it is. I very much hope that those children will get the benefit of the ongoing investment that this Government are putting in.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Shortage of time is good reason to call a master of brevity: Mr John Redwood.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): When will pupils be able to take up places in the new grammars envisaged in the Secretary of State’s policy?

Justine Greening: Once we have got through the response to our consultation and, I hope, had the chance to change the law that prevents grammars from being opened, I hope that we will be able to make some progress.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Finally, whether she is a mistress of brevity or not, I call Fiona Mactaggart.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Headteachers in Slough schools were very grateful to the Minister for School Standards when he met them to discuss teacher shortages. Unfortunately—I am sorry to bring this to the Chamber—I have reminded him twice since then that they have not received the letter that he promised them at that meeting. Can I expect it to be sent before Christmas?

Mr Gibb: I will do my utmost to ensure that they receive a letter. I enjoyed meeting them and they raised some very important points, but we are ensuring that we are filling teacher training places. There are more teachers in our initial teacher training system now than there were last year.

Mr Speaker: Well done.
European Council 2016

3.33 pm

**The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on last week’s European Council.

Both the UK and the rest of the EU are preparing for the negotiations that will begin when we trigger article 50 before the end of March next year, but the main focus of this Council was, rightly, on how we can work together to address some of the most pressing challenges that we face. These include responding to the migration crisis, strengthening Europe’s security and helping to alleviate the suffering in Syria. As I have said, for as long as the UK is a member of the EU we will continue to play our full part, and that is what this Council showed, with the UK making a significant contribution on each of those issues.

On migration, from the outset the UK has pushed for a comprehensive approach that focuses on the root causes of migration as the best way to reduce the number of people coming to Europe. I have called for more action in source and transit countries to disrupt the smuggling networks, to improve local capacity to control borders, and to support sustainable livelihoods, both for people living there and for refugees. I have also said that we must better distinguish between economic migrants and refugees, swiftly returning those who have no right to remain and thereby sending out a deterrence message to others thinking of embarking on perilous journeys.

The Council agreed to action in all these areas, and the UK remains fully committed to playing our part. We have already provided training to the Libyan coastguard. The Royal Navy is providing practical support in the Mediterranean and Aegean. We will also deploy 40 additional specialist staff to the Greek islands to accelerate the processing of claims, particularly from Iraqi, Afghan and Eritrean nationals, and to help to return those who have no right to stay. Ultimately, we need a long-term, sustainable approach, for that is the best way to retain the consent of our people to provide support and sanctuary to those most in need.

I turn to security and defence. Whether it is deterring Russian aggression, countering terrorism or fighting organised crime, the UK remains firmly committed to the security of our European neighbours. That is true now, and it will remain true once we have left the EU. At this Council we welcomed the commitment from all member states to take greater responsibility for their security, to invest more resources and to develop more capabilities. That is the right approach, and, as the Council made clear, it should be done in a way that complements rather than duplicates NATO.

A stronger EU and a stronger NATO can be mutually reinforcing, and that should be our aim. We must never lose sight of the fact that NATO will always be the bedrock of our collective defence in Europe, and we must never allow anything to undermine it. We also agreed at the Council to renew tier 3 economic sanctions on Russia for another six months, maintaining the pressure on Russia to implement the Minsk agreements in full.

I turn to the appalling situation in Syria. We have all seen the devastating pictures on our TV screens and heard heartbreaking stories of families struggling to get to safety. At this Council we heard directly from the mayor of eastern Aleppo, a brave and courageous man who has already witnessed his city brought to rubble, for neighbours murdered and children’s lives destroyed. He had one simple plea for us: to get those who have survived through years of conflict, torture and fear to safety. Together with our European partners, we must do all we can to help.

The Council was unequivocal in its condemnation of President Assad and his backers, Russia and Iran, who must bear the responsibility for the tragedy in Aleppo. They must now allow the UN to safely evacuate the innocent people of Aleppo—Syrians whom President Assad claims to represent. We have seen some progress in recent days, but a few busloads is not enough when there are thousands more who must be rescued, and we cannot have those buses being attacked as they have been.

On Thursday afternoon my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary summoned the Russian and Iranian Ambassadors to make it clear that we expect them to help. Over the weekend, the UK has been working with our international partners to secure agreement on a UN Security Council resolution that would send in UN officials to monitor the evacuation of civilians and provide unfettered humanitarian access. That has been agreed unanimously this afternoon, and we now need it to be implemented in full. President Assad may be congratulating his regime forces on their actions in Aleppo, but we are in no doubt: this is no victory; it is a tragedy, and one we will not forget. Last week’s Council reiterated that those responsible must be held to account.

Alongside our diplomatic efforts, the UK is going to provide a further £20 million of practical support for those who are most vulnerable. That includes £10 million for trusted humanitarian partners working on the front line in some of the hardest-to-reach places in Syria to help them to deliver food parcels and medical supplies to those most in need, and an additional £10 million to UNICEF to help it to provide life-saving aid supplies for Syrian refugees now massing at the Jordanian border. As the mayor of Aleppo has said, it is, sadly, too late to save all those who have been lost, but it is not too late to save those who remain. That is what we must now do.

I turn to Brexit. I updated the Council on the UK’s plans for leaving the European Union. I explained that two weeks ago this House voted by a considerable majority—almost six to one—to support the Government by delivering the referendum result and invoking article 50 before the end of March. The UK’s Supreme Court is expected to rule next month on whether the Government require parliamentary legislation in order to do this. I am clear that the Government will respect the verdict of our independent judiciary, but I am equally clear that whichever way the judgment goes, we will meet the timetable I have set out.

At the Council, I also reaffirmed my commitment to a smooth and orderly exit. In this spirit, I made it clear to the other EU leaders that it remains my objective that we give reassurance early on in the negotiations to EU citizens living in the UK and UK citizens living in EU countries that their right to stay where they have made their homes will be protected by our withdrawal. This is an issue that I would like to agree quickly, but that clearly requires the agreement of the rest of the EU.
Finally, I welcomed the subsequent short discussion between the 27 other leaders on their own plans for the UK’s withdrawal. It is right that the other leaders prepare for the negotiations, just as we are making our own preparations. That is in everyone’s best interests.

My aim is to cement the UK as a close partner of the EU once we have left. As I have said before, I want the deal we negotiate to reflect the kind of mature, co-operative relationship that close friends and allies enjoy: a deal that will give our companies the maximum freedom to trade with and operate in the European market and allow European businesses to do the same here, and a deal that will deliver the deepest possible co-operation to ensure our national security and the security of our allies, but a deal that will mean that when it comes to decisions about our national interest, such as how we control immigration, we can make these decisions for ourselves, and a deal that will mean our laws are once again made in Britain, not in Brussels. With a calm and measured approach, this Government will honour the will of the British people and secure the right deal that will make a success of Brexit for the UK, for the EU and for the world. I commend this statement to the House.

3.41 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of her statement. As we approach the end of this year, I think we can all agree this has been a year of enormous change in this country and the rest of the world, but with that change comes a great deal of division. As we move swiftly towards the triggering of article 50, I want to appeal to the Prime Minister not only to work harder to heal those divisions in Britain, but to make sure that her new year’s resolutions include a commitment to build better relations with our European partners so that we get the best deal for the people of this country, not just a Brexit that benefits big business and bankers.

At the moment, it is clear that the Prime Minister and Britain are becoming increasingly isolated on the international stage. If we are to build a successful Britain after Brexit, it is more vital than ever that our relationship with our European partners remains strong, cordial and respectful. It is also clear from my own discussions with European leaders that they are becoming increasingly frustrated by her shambolic Government and the contradictory approach to Brexit negotiations. The mixed messages from her Front Bench only add to the confusion. This Government fail to speak for the whole country; instead, we hear a babble of voices speaking for themselves and their vested interests.

For instance, last week we were told by Britain’s permanent representative to the EU that a Brexit deal may take 10 years, contradicting what the Secretary of State for Brexit told a Select Committee that day, only for the Secretary of who told us that Britain was looking for a transitional bit of a difference there. We also heard from the Chancellor, State for Brexit told a Select Committee that day, when may take 10 years, contradicting what the Secretary of permanent representative to the EU that a Brexit deal speaking for themselves and their vested interests.

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For instance, last week we were told by Britain’s permanent representative to the EU that a Brexit deal may take 10 years, contradicting what the Secretary of State for Brexit told a Select Committee that day, when he said a deal could be struck in 18 months. There is a bit of a difference there. We also heard from the Chancellor, who told us that Britain was looking for a transitional deal with the European Union, only for the Secretary of State for International Trade to warn against a transitional deal, saying any arrangements close to the status quo would go against the wishes of those who voted to leave. The people of Britain deserve better than this confusion at the heart of Government.

Confidence is being lost. The Office for Budget Responsibility made its own judgment on the Government’s Brexit plans in November, when it published new forecasts for 2017: growth was revised down, wages revised down and business investment revised down; the only thing the OBR raised was its forecast for inflation. The Government are risking even weaker growth than they have delivered so far and an exodus of financial services, and hitting manufacturing industry very hard.

I welcome the fact that the Government have now accepted Labour’s demands for a published Brexit plan, but it is still unclear how the plan will be presented and when we will receive it in Parliament. Can the Prime Minister today do what the Secretary of State for Brexit, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State for International Trade and the permanent representative to the EU all failed to do last week and give this country some real answers? Can she tell us when the House will receive the Government’s plan for article 50 and how long we will be given to scrutinise that plan? Can she also tell us how long the Government envisage the whole process taking? Can she tell us whether the Government will be looking for an interim transitional deal with the European Union? These are basic questions that have still not been answered, nearly six months after Britain voted to leave the European Union.

There were also reports last week that the UK will be asked to pay a €50 billion bill to honour commitments to the EU budget until 2020. Can the Prime Minister tell this House if that is the case? Can she update us all on the Government’s contingency plans for those projects and programmes in the UK that are currently reliant on EU funding after 2020? There is much concern in many parts of the country about those programmes.

I welcome the Prime Minister’s desire to bring forward and give greater clarity on the issue of rights of EU citizens in the United Kingdom. However, if she is serious about this, why wait? Why will the Government not end the worry and uncertainty, as this House demanded in July, and give an unequivocal commitment to guarantee people’s rights before article 50 is triggered, as both the TUC and the British Chambers of Commerce called for this weekend? Not only is it the right thing to do; it would also send a clear signal to our colleagues and our European friends that Britain is committed to doing the right thing and committed to a friendly future relationship.

With that in mind, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Austrian President, Alexander Van der Bellen, on his election. I am sure we all agree that his victory in the presidential elections represents a victory for respect and kindness over hate and division, and is a signal against the dangerous rise of the far right across Europe.

I am also glad that the European Union Council leaders discussed the other pressing global issues last week, notably the terrible situation in Syria. I therefore want to use this opportunity to renew the calls I made in a letter to the Prime Minister last week for an urgent and concerted effort from the Government to press for an end to the violence and for a United Nations-led ceasefire, along with the creation of UN-brokered humanitarian corridors and the issuance of effective advance warnings of attack to the civilian population, as well as urgent talks through the UN to achieve a negotiated political settlement. It is clear that the rules
of war are being broken on all sides. Labour has long condemned attacks on civilian targets on all sides, including those by Russian and pro-Syrian Government forces in Aleppo, for which there can be no excuse.

I also know that Cyprus and reunification were raised at the Council meeting. Will the Prime Minister give us an update on what was said on this issue? Britain is after all a guarantor of Cypriot independence under the 1960 treaty.

There is a lot to do in 2017, with a lot of important decisions to be made. I make a plea to the Prime Minister to represent all sides, whether they voted to leave or remain, and to make the right decisions that benefit not just her party but everyone in this country.

The Prime Minister: On the issue of Cyprus, President Anastasiades updated us on the talks that had taken place. These are important talks. I think we all accept that we have perhaps the best opportunity for a settlement in Cyprus that we have seen for many, many years. The talks have been taking place under UN auspices between the two leaders. They have been encouraged and generated by the two leaders on the island, and it is important that we recognise the leadership they have shown on this issue. The right hon. Gentleman is right. There are three guarantors: Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom. We stand ready to play our part, as required and when it is appropriate for us to do so. There is a meeting coming up in January, and there is a possibility that it will be attended by others such as the United Kingdom. In the EU Council’s conclusions, it said that it stood ready to participate if that were part of helping the deal to come through.

On Syria, the right hon. Gentleman wrote to me asking for us to take action through the United Nations. We have been working over the weekend to ensure that there was a UN Security Council resolution today that was accepted. As all Members will know, Russia has vetoed a number of previous Security Council resolutions, and the most recent one before today was vetoed by both Russia and China. It is very clear that we now have a resolution that has been accepted by Russia and China, and accepted unanimously by the Security Council. It provides for humanitarian access and for UN monitoring of people leaving Aleppo, which is important.

The right hon. Gentleman spent most of his comments on Brexit. He started off by talking about our wanting a deal that benefits the United Kingdom. Yes, I have been saying that ever since I first came into this role. We want to ensure that we get the best possible deal, but I have to say to him that we do not get the possible deal in negotiations by laying out everything we want in advance. That is the whole point of negotiations.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about isolation. The point is that the UK is going to leave the European Union. We are leaving the group that is the European Union. In due course, they will meet only as 27 members, because we will no longer be a member. It is clear from what happened at the EU Council that, as long as we are a member, we will continue to play our full part with the European Union.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about EU funds, and funds that are currently intended to continue beyond the date at which we would leave the European Union. The Chancellor of the Exchequer set out the position very clearly some weeks ago. Those funds will continue to be met provided they give value for money and meet the UK Government’s objectives.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke about the length of the process. As he knows, once we trigger article 50, the treaty allows for a process that can take up to two years. Of course, how long it takes within that period depends on the progress of the negotiations that take place. He then spoke about uncertainty and the need for investment in the UK. He gave the impression of a bleak economic picture, but I remind him that ours is the fastest-growing economy this year in the G7. Let us look at the companies that have announced new additional investment since the Brexit referendum: Honda, Jaguar Land Rover, Nissan, Aldi, Associated British Ports, CAF, Facebook, Google, GlaxoSmithKline, Sitel and Statoil. The list will continue because this is still a good place to invest and a good place to grow businesses.

The right hon. Gentleman then talked about confusion on the Front Bench. Well, he has obviously been looking at his own Front Bench. Let us take one very simple issue: immigration. The shadow Home Secretary suggests that freedom of movement should be maintained; the shadow Chancellor said that we should have a fair deal on freedom of movement; and the shadow Brexit Secretary says we should have immigration controls. They cannot even agree on one aspect of leaving the European Union. With the Leader of the Opposition’s negotiation technique, if he were in office, we would as sure as goodness be getting the worst possible deal we could get for the United Kingdom.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): When my right hon. Friend was at the Council and reminded the Council leaders of her generous offer to allow EU citizens here in the UK to remain, and for UK citizens to receive the same privilege, did she manage to take Donald Tusk to one side and ask him simply why, when his own Government was keen to agree to that, he turned round and vetoed it?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right that I made it clear once again that I hope the issue of EU citizens living here and UK citizens living in EU member states can be dealt with at an early stage of the negotiations. The other member states and the Council have been clear that they are not prepared to enter into negotiations before article 50 is triggered, but I will continue to remind them of our hope, for a very good reason: we want to give certainty and reassurance to people that this issue can be dealt with at a very early stage and then the people concerned can get on with their lives.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): May I begin by thanking the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement and, as it is the last opportunity to do so, wish colleagues a very merry Christmas, happy Hogmanay and a fantastic 2017?

It is now more than six months since the Brexit referendum, when more than 62% of voters in Scotland voted to remain in the European Union. Tomorrow the Scottish Government will become the first Administration in the UK to publish their plans in detail. The Prime Minister has said that she will seriously engage with the
Scottish Government, which is to be welcomed, and that she has a respect agenda. Will she therefore commit to meeting the First Minister to incorporate priorities of the Scottish Government in the UK negotiating position?

On security, the Prime Minister’s statement welcomed commitments on capability, including on cyber threats. Without going into details, for obvious reasons, is she confident that enough safeguards are in place regarding democratic institutions in the UK, including political parties?

The violence in the middle east was discussed in the Council, and across the House we welcome any initiatives that make a difference in Syria, but there was no mention in the Prime Minister’s statement of Yemen. Is it true that senior Ministers have known for some time that UK cluster munitions have been used in the current conflict in Yemen? When was she told about that, and when will the UK join our European partners in starting to have a more ethical foreign policy on both Saudi Arabia and Yemen?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman will have seen that the Defence Secretary will make a statement on Yemen later this afternoon. The issue was not discussed at the European Council. We focused on the issues I mentioned in my statement.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about cyber-security and political parties. Maintaining their cyber-security is a matter for individual political parties. It is up to them to look at how they undertake that.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the document that the Scottish Government will publish tomorrow. I took a call from the First Minister this morning, in which I assured her that we will look very seriously at the proposals that the Scottish Government are bringing forward. I welcome the fact that they have been looking at their priorities. We have been encouraging all the devolved Administrations to do so, so that those priorities can be taken into account in the UK negotiations on leaving the European Union.

There is already a structure in place that enables us to discuss those priorities with the devolved Administrations. The Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations will meet in early January. It has been meeting regularly with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. There will be a further session of the JMC plenary in January. That normally meets only once a year, if that, but we are increasing the number of its meetings precisely so that we can engage with the devolved Administrations on these issues.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that people in the Opposition and in business who say that we should make compromises by offering money or some control over our laws or borders to get a deal are bidding against our country, making it more difficult to achieve a good deal and misunderstanding what the majority voted for?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my right hon. Friend that the public want us to get on and get the best possible deal for the United Kingdom. They want us to leave the European Union and deliver success in doing that. It is absolutely right that we do not give out every detail of our negotiating strategy because, as I say, that would be the way to get the worst possible deal.

Mr Pat Mcladden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): On Friday, along with other hon. Members from Wolverhampton, I met UTC Aerospace, which employs 1,600 people in high-value manufacturing jobs in Wolverhampton. That company raised with us membership of the European Aviation Safety Agency. When the Prime Minister says that Brexit means Brexit, does she mean that we will no longer participate in the European Aviation Safety Agency and many other such agencies, including for example the European Medical Agency?

The Prime Minister: It is precisely because we need to look with great care and consideration at the wide range of our relationships with Europe that we have taken time before we trigger article 50. This is exactly the sort of work the Department for Exiting the European Union is doing: looking at the range of organisations, some of which are linked to membership of the European Union and some of which will not be so linked to membership of the European Union, and making a decision; and, crucially, talking to each sector about what is important to them, so we understand what really matters to business.

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): While welcoming my right hon. Friend’s calm, considered and thorough preparations before triggering article 50, does she agree that a speedy conclusion of the subsequent negotiations will be in this country’s interests, both to put an end to damaging uncertainty and because, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, every week’s additional delay in leaving the EU costs this country £250 million net per week?

The Prime Minister: As I said in an earlier response to the Leader of the Opposition, the treaty sets out a potential two-year process of negotiations. For how long, over those two years, it is necessary for the negotiations to take is a matter for the progress of those discussions and talks. My right hon. Friend makes a very valid point that the sooner certainty can come the better that will be for business, but we need to make sure we are getting the right deal for the United Kingdom.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Perhaps the Prime Minister could then tell us with some certainty when her plan for exiting the European Union, which she has agreed to present to this House, will be ready. Presumably, it will be some time before she triggers article 50.

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): In their joint statement of 15 December, the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission, and the Heads of State of all 27 member states, unanimously insisted that “access to the Single Market requires acceptance of all four freedoms”, including freedom of movement and the European Court of Justice. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such an ultimatum is unacceptable and that it will not be accepted by the British people?

The Prime Minister: I have said all along that I believe that underlyng part of the vote to leave the European Union was the desire of the British people to have control over immigration, and for decisions on
immigration to be made by the Government here in the United Kingdom. We should deliver on that. I look at these issues in terms of the deal we want to negotiate and the outcome we want, which is the best possible deal for trading with, and operating within, the single European market, but that should be commensurate with the other requirements we have: British laws made here in Britain and control on immigration.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement and for advance sight of it. Following the European Council, it appears that the Prime Minister is leading our country not just out of the European Union but out of the single market and the customs union, neither of which were on the ballot paper last June. If instead remain had won by a whisker last June, would the Government have had a mandate, I wonder, for a hard remain? Would Mr Cameron have been stood there bouncing us into the euro and Schengen? Does the Prime Minister agree that, ludicrous as that sounds, it is no more ludicrous than the extreme rewriting of the referendum result that she now seeks to impose on the British people?

The Prime Minister: The majority vote in the referendum was for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. That is what we will be delivering. Once again, the hon. Gentleman raises questions about means rather than ends. What we want is the best possible outcome in the trading relationship between the UK and the European Union, and for operating within the European Union. That is where our focus should be—not on particular processes to get there.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The Council conclusions stressed the Union’s continued resolve to deepen and strengthen its relationship with Ukraine in the face of current challenges. How strongly does the Prime Minister expect her Government to support Ukraine after we have left the European Union?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that the European Council was concerned and wanted to ensure that we have that continuing relationship with Ukraine. The UK is already supporting Ukraine in a number of ways. When we leave the European Union, we will look at our continuing bilateral relationships with countries across the European continent. We are already providing money to establish the national anti-corruption bureau in Ukraine and we are supporting energy reform to reduce the country’s dependence on Russian gas. We are offering defensive training to Ukrainian armed forces and supporting internal reform with the Ukrainian ministry of defence. We already have a number of areas in which we are supporting Ukraine. I expect that we would continue to want a good bilateral relationship with Ukraine once we have left the European Union.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister update us on any discussions about how successful the European Union views its arrangements with Turkey in respect of control of the border and flows of immigration?

The Prime Minister: We support the continuing EU-Turkey deal. It has had an impact on the migratory movements across the Aegean, but there are of course elements to the EU-Turkey deal, particularly visa liberalisation, with which the UK is not involved because we are not one of the Schengen member states. That matter of visa liberalisation is still being discussed by members of the Schengen border zone. As I say, the UK is not part of that, but we should recognise that the arrangements in place so far have had an impact on movements into Greece from Turkey. Crucially, we need to ensure that the process of returning people who have no right to be in Greece is operating as smoothly as possible. That is one reason why we are offering extra staff to Greece, so that the process of dealing with those claims can be carried out more smoothly.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The whole House will welcome the focus on Syria and Aleppo that my right hon. Friend has reported from the meeting. Most welcome is the additional British humanitarian support, including for UNICEF, that the Prime Minister has announced, and the part played by British diplomats and the Government over the weekend in securing the successful UN resolution along the lines of the debate here last week. Will she ensure that over the Christmas and new year holiday, the full span of Government attention will continue on securing unfettered access for humanitarian workers, medical supplies and food, bearing in mind that there are still more than 50,000 people out in the open in Aleppo who are very frightened and living in temperatures well below freezing?

The Prime Minister: With his experience, my right hon. Friend recognises that it is about not just agreeing a resolution, but ensuring that it is then implemented, so that making humanitarian aid available to people and enabling them to leave safely can be put into practice. I assure my right hon. Friend that we recognise the importance of getting momentum going on this. It will be important to do that over the coming days and weeks. Our focus on it will continue.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): May I ask the Prime Minister about the risks of the cliff-edge in April 2019, which is already prompting some of our key financial institutions, such as Lloyd’s of London, to think about moving some of their business out of Britain? Does she agree with the Chancellor, who said that it would be helpful if we started to discuss a transitional arrangement going beyond that particular deadline, and started discussing it now?

The Prime Minister: The Chancellor reflected the comments I made when I spoke to the CBI, recognising the desire for business to have some certainty beyond that point of leaving the European Union. That is one of the reasons why we have already announced that we are going to bring EU law into domestic law in the UK at that point, so that people can have some certainty about the point of movement from membership of the European Union to being outside it.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): At the end of November, Ilse Aigner, the Christian Social Union economy Minister of Bavaria, gave a clear warning to her coalition partners in Berlin that uncertainty
could damage the Bavarian economy, as the UK is one
of its most important trading partners. Does the Prime
Minister appreciate that there will be significant forces
in Europe supporting her timetable to trigger article 50
at the end of March in order to bring to a conclusion
the arrangements for free trade that exist between us
and Bavaria?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises an
important point, specifically about Bavaria, but the
overall point is a very simple one. This is not just about
what is in the interests of the United Kingdom; it is also
about what is in the interests of the remaining 27 members
of the European Union. As we negotiate that deal, I
expect us to negotiate one that will be right for the UK
but that will retain a strong European Union, with
which we will be trading and working together on
matters of mutual interest.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I welcome the
extension of sanctions against Russia for a further six
months, but there has been very little visible progress on
the Minsk accord in recent months. What does the
Prime Minister think the extension will achieve, and
how can we move the process forward?

The Prime Minister: The Council was updated by
Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande, who have
obviously been leading in relation to discussions on the
Minsk agreement. Everyone is concerned about the fact
that the agreement still has not been put in place. I
believe that we needed to roll over the sanctions in order
to show our continuing rigour, and our continuing
expectation that Russia will abide by the requirements.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, yes, the good doctor. Dr Julian
Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): We see EU
countries dangerously duplicating NATO’s structures,
but without American participation. Would it not do
much more for the defence of Europe if France and
Germany, and other EU states that are members of
NATO, spent a minimum of 2% of their GDP on
defence?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my right hon. Friend.
We want to see other countries step up to the plate. This
country is spending 2% of its budget on defence; we
think that others should be doing the same, and I have
been encouraging them to do so.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): It is clear
that there are many differences among Conservative
Members over freedom of movement, but is it not also
clear that if the free movement of labour continued, it
would make a mockery of a majority decision made by
the British people in a referendum?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, I think one of
the things that underlay the vote was people’s desire to
see the British Government control immigration from
the European Union. If the hon. Gentleman does not
think freedom of movement should continue, I suggest
that he talk to his own Front Benchers about it.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): As my right
hon. Friend knows, more than 10,000 Ukrainian servicemen
have been killed since the beginning of the Russian-backed
conflict, and progress on Minsk appears to have stalled.
Does she agree that, as signatories to the Budapest
memorandum, we have a special responsibility? Will
she look into what further pressure we can put on
Russia, and also what additional assistance we can give
the people of Ukraine?

The Prime Minister: We do consider what more we
can do. My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary
announced recently that we would undertake an extension
of the training of Ukrainian forces, and my right hon.
Friend the Foreign Secretary is looking into whether
there are other ways in which we can ensure that the
Minsk agreement is implemented in full. However, I
think it important for us also to work through the
European Union, and to put the pressure of the EU
behind the process.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Did the Prime
Minister discuss with fellow leaders interference by
Russia in the political processes of western democracies,
including our own, through the use of propaganda and
cyber? What action is she taking to investigate what
may already have happened in this country, and what is
she doing to prevent it from happening in future?

The Prime Minister: I think that everyone is aware
of the way in which Russia is currently operating, and
of the more aggressive stance that it is taking in a
number of respects. I am sure that the right hon.
Gentleman would not expect me to go into detail about
how we look at these matters, particularly cyber-related
matters—which were mentioned earlier by the right
hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson)—but I
assure him that we take the issue of state-sponsored
intervention and cyber attacks very seriously indeed.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): The Prime Minister’s
steadfast commitment to reassuring 2.8 million EU
citizens about their position in the United Kingdom is
highly welcome, but will she look at the cross-party
“British Future” report, on which I worked along with
the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston
(Ms Stuart) and the hon. Member for Stretford and
Urmston (Kate Green)? It includes suggestions on how
to regularise the immigration status of the 1.8 million
EU citizens who are on track to gain permanent residence,
but who we suggest should be granted a bespoke indefinite
leave to remain.

The Prime Minister: I am aware of the report my hon.
Friend refers to and can assure her that we do of course
look very seriously at any proposals that come forward
on this and other matters relating to Brexit.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I press the
Prime Minister on the reply she gave to the parliamentary
leader of the Scottish National party, the right hon.
Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), on Yemen? I
appreciate she was the only leader of a foreign country
to address the Gulf Cooperation Council recently and
the Foreign Secretary has spoken courageously about
the situation in Yemen. While we celebrate Christmas
on Sunday, the people of Hudaydah will be eating grass
and drinking sea water in order to survive. What does it
say about politics in 2016 that the richest club in the world is unable to find time to discuss one of the poorest countries?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that we take the situation in Yemen very seriously indeed. There are a number of ways in which we are acting in relation to that, not least in the provision of humanitarian aid. The Foreign Office Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), was in Riyadh yesterday, and one of the issues he was discussing was the possibility of the opening of the port so that supplies can be got through to Yemen.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): My reading of the Council conclusions both on migration and on defence and security co-operation demonstrate the strength of British influence, rather than the weakness, which was the Leader of the Opposition’s conclusion. Given that we do spend 2% of our GDP on defence and that we spend 0.7% on aid, addressing both sides of that argument, are we in a good position to make this case, and does it not show that when we have left the EU our European partners will still want that close relationship with us, which is why we will get a good deal?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We should be proud of the fact that in this country we spend 2% on defence and 0.7% on international aid. That is recognised not just across the EU, but internationally, and it often enables us as the United Kingdom to take the lead on a number of these issues. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: from everything we saw—from the position and role the UK has played in European Council discussions—it is clear people will want to continue to have a good relationship with the UK, and that puts us in a good place for getting the right deal.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the French and British diplomats in New York who got the Security Council resolution today, but is the Prime Minister aware that the Assad regime’s representative immediately denounced it? It is quite clear that the Syrian Government are not going to be happy about this. Will she take practical steps to ensure the resolution is actually implemented, and particularly to protect those people who are witnesses to crime and those who, like the White Helmets, have been so brave in east Aleppo but now could be at risk from Hezbollah, Iranian militias or the Assad regime?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to congratulate UK and French diplomats, who worked very hard to make sure this resolution would be accepted by the Security Council. We now have to ensure it is put into practice. He refers to the evidence of crime, and we have been taking action to make sure people are equipped and trained to gather evidence of crimes that have taken place, so that they can be properly investigated.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Earlier the Prime Minister said she wants that “when it comes to decisions about our national interest, such as how we control immigration, we can make these decisions for ourselves”. I commend that statement. When she finally presents her plan to Parliament, will she keep it brief, focus on outcomes not means, and simply say we are leaving the EU, we are leaving the internal market, and we are going to reclaim control of our borders and our laws, but that nothing in that militates against concluding a free trade deal which is overwhelmingly in the interests of our European friends and allies?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that we need to ensure that we get the best possible deal, and he is also right to focus on the outcome of the deal that we want rather than the particular means to achieve that outcome. It is absolutely clear that it is possible for us to get a deal that will be a very good trade deal for the UK, but which will also be in the interests of the EU.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister confirm that remaining in the European arrest warrant regime, in Eurojust and in Europol will be in the best interests of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman knows that I have stood at this Dispatch Box on previous occasions and argued that we should indeed remain within those aspects. The whole question of security and co-operation on crime will of course be part of the negotiations, but this is not just a question of what is in the UK's interests. When we work with partners in the European Union, it is in their interests too.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What are the chances that the proposed European defence fund will add new money to collective European defence and security, and what is the Prime Minister’s attitude to the linked matter of the revision of the Athena mechanism that is due next year?

The Prime Minister: The European defence fund is referred to in the Council’s conclusions. The matter of how it will operate in the future has yet to be fully fleshed out. One issue that was discussed by European Council members was a concern to ensure better procurement of defence equipment across the European Union, and it is in that context that these issues are being considered.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I push the Prime Minister on the matter of security? Viewed from Moscow, Europe must look so much more disunited and weak since June. The fact is that we have 100,000 men and women in our armed forces—you could fit them all inside Wembley stadium. What would happen if tanks did roll across borders in this unstable period of European history? What would we do?

The Prime Minister: The Secretary of State for Defence has told me that the figure is 200,000 rather than 100,000, but let us look seriously at the hon. Gentleman’s question. I spoke in my statement of the importance of NATO as the bedrock of our security and that of our allies. That organisation is important in ensuring our defence. What are this Government doing in relation to defence? We are spending 2% of our GDP on defence
and committing more than £170 billion over a number of years to investment in defence equipment, ensuring that we have the defence that we need—the forces and the equipment—to keep us safe.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend tell us how our support for the Syrian people through our aid budget is helping to alleviate some of the horrendous suffering over there?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. As we focus on the specific question of Aleppo, it is easy to forget the significant contribution that the UK is making, through its aid budget, to the humanitarian effort to help the refugees from Syria. Of course, much of that is going to refugees in the countries around Syria—Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. We are the second biggest bilateral donor of humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees and we have now committed £2.3 billion.

That means that medical supplies, food and water are getting through to people who would not otherwise have them. It also means that children are being educated as a result of the money that is being spent by the United Kingdom, and it is absolutely right that we should do that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Prime Minister for her solid and strong stance on Brexit. However, 27 EU members met without her being in attendance. Is this the beginning of a cloak and dagger approach by the EU? What steps are being taken to ensure that we are not kept in the dark, that everything is open and transparent and that the British viewpoint as expressed at the ballot box is sacrosanct and remains a priority?

The Prime Minister: The 27 members of the European Union met for, I think, 25 minutes to discuss aspects of the process of the UK leaving the EU. It is absolutely right that they should meet together as the 27 because, when we trigger article 50, we want to ensure that the process is as smooth and orderly as possible. That is in our interests and in the interests of our economy. It is also in their interests and the interests of their economies. So I welcome the fact that they are meeting as the 27 to discuss the process and to make preparations, just as we are doing, for what will happen when we trigger article 50.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): It is certainly absolutely right that we maintain good relationships with the 27 member states of the European Union, but what steps is the Prime Minister taking to ensure that we talk to European countries that are not in the EU to gain insight into their experiences of being in that position and the plan for the future?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point that is about our relationship not just with the EU as a whole, but with individual countries that are members of the EU and those that are not members. We do hold such discussions. I have had bilateral talks, and I reassure those to whom I speak that a United Kingdom that is outside the EU will not be leaving Europe. We want to continue to have good relations with our friends and allies across Europe. We want good bilateral relationships that enable us also to trade well with those nations.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): One of the key aspects of security co-operation across Europe is the ability to impose sanctions through the EU sanctions regime. What discussions has the Prime Minister had with her EU counterparts about the UK’s involvement in that regime after we leave the EU?

The Prime Minister: I assure the hon. Gentleman that our focus is on ensuring that the UK’s voice is heard when we put forward our opinion on matters such as the sanctions against Russia and the importance of maintaining those sanctions until the Minsk agreement is implemented.

Mr Speaker: In the pursuit of a soothing, emollient and understated voice, I call Philip Davies.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Something on which both sides of the EU referendum campaign can agree is that one of the big issues during the campaign was the amount of money that we give to the EU each year. Will the Prime Minister therefore pledge that when we leave the EU we will not be paying any money towards the EU budget? Even contemplating that would surely be to contemplate betraying what people voted for in the referendum.

The Prime Minister: Obviously, while we remain members of the EU, we will continue to have obligations as members of EU. What is important is that when we leave the EU, people want us to ensure that it is the British Government that decide how taxpayers’ money is spent.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): The European Council stressed that those responsible for breaches of international law in Syria must be held accountable and that the EU is considering all available options. No one would disagree with that sentiment, but will the Prime Minister set out what it means in practice?

The Prime Minister: Where people have breached international humanitarian law, the UK Government’s position is that that should be investigated and properly dealt with and that people should be brought to justice as a result. As for the available options, some further sanctions have been considered. This is an issue that the UK has raised in the past and one that we continue to look at.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that her first duty is to defend the rights of British subjects? It would therefore be a foolish negotiating strategy to guarantee the rights of EU nationals here unilaterally—much as we would like to—until we have achieved reciprocity for UK nationals residing in other states?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is fairly obvious that the UK Prime Minister should have concern for UK citizens. We do not want UK citizens who live in other EU member states to be left high and dry, which is why our position has always been that we will guarantee the status of EU citizens living here provided that UK citizens living in EU member states have their rights guaranteed as well.
Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Will Brexit deliver what the Prime Minister’s three Brexiteer Ministers promised in the referendum and what the majority of voters supported—namely a £350 million a week payment to the national health service? Or will we get a bill of £50 billion for which nobody voted?

The Prime Minister: When we leave the EU, we will be delivering on what my colleagues who campaigned to leave the European Union campaigned for and what the people voted for: the UK no longer being a member of the EU and therefore being able to take control of how taxpayers’ money is spent, how our laws are made and our immigration.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): In the Prime Minister’s conversations with our EU partners, will she make it clear that, whatever deal we strike with the European Union, we will be offering free trade? Will she asked them why anybody is considering a reversion to protectionism and tariffs, particularly in view of the fact that paragraph 5 of article 3 of the treaty on European Union enjoins the EU to contribute to “free and fair trade”?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point: this is about getting a good trade relationship with the European Union, which is in their interests as well as in ours. Lots of reference is made to the process in relation to trade, but actually what we want to focus on is the outcome: the best possible deal in terms of trading with and operating within the European Union.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Under this Prime Minister’s leadership, Britain has opposed strengthening trade defence measures and has watered down action on the lesser duty rule, which has crippled the UK steel industry. Will people not be right to think that when this Prime Minister takes control of future British trade deals, both British workers and British industry will be more exposed than ever before?

The Prime Minister: Actually, the trade defence arrangements that have been in place have had a significant impact on the dumping of steel. Of course everybody recognises the importance and impact of the overcapacity of steel in China, and the Government have taken a number of steps to reduce the costs in relation to climate change and energy for the steel industry—more than £100 million has now been made available to the steel industry as a result of that. We have ensured that other factors can be taken into account when people are looking at procurement of steel—social and economic factors can be taken into account. On the trade defence arrangements that take place in Europe, we think, yes, we should ensure that we are looking at the impact on producers, but we also need to look at the impact on consumers. What we call for is a balance in dealing with these issues.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): As the Prime Minister reaches her first Christmas in her role, may I commend her for the sureness of touch she has demonstrated as Prime Minister, commend her for setting up a fresh new Department so that we can leave the European Union, and remind her that in Kettering 61% of people voted to leave and want her to get on with it as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. I assure him that I am focused, as is the Department for Exiting the European Union and everybody across government, on delivering what overall the British people wanted, which is leaving the European Union.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May I press the Prime Minister: how will our Government hold President Assad to account for the decimation of Aleppo?

The Prime Minister: This is a matter that we and others in the international community will be looking at. Of course, at the moment President Assad is still there in Syria. We have said from the beginning that we want to see a political transition away from President Assad, but we are very clear that we need to look carefully at all the actions that have been taken in relation to the conflict in Syria and ensure that people are held to account for those actions, including, obviously, the ones that break international humanitarian law.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on, and thank her for, the robust stance she took in representing the United Kingdom at the recent EU Council meeting. Will she say whether any of the leaders of the 27 expressed a wish not to want to trade with the UK in goods and services?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to tell my hon. Friend that when I have been meeting leaders bilaterally, they have been very keen to express their desire to continue to trade and have a good trading relationship with the United Kingdom.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What has happened in Aleppo has not just been a tragedy—it has also been a series of acts of deliberate brutality by Putin and his regime. The Prime Minister is absolutely right to say that those responsible must be held to account, but there is something she could do immediately: she could sign up to the amendment to the Criminal Finances Bill tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), which would take the assets of those who have been involved in human rights abuses and in these war crimes off them.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point, but we already have legislative capacity in relation to such matters. That is why the amendment has been considered not to be necessary and not to take us forward.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Assuming that a humanitarian corridor to Aleppo, supported by a clear United Nations mandate, is a possibility, would Her Majesty’s Government be prepared to consider using our military forces, perhaps in small teams, to monitor such an arrangement—something in which we have considerable expertise and to date have had considerable success?
Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister could always introduce an addendum to her last answer, which would doubtless bring great happiness into the life of the hon. Member for Rhondda.

The Prime Minister: I must apologise to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant); I was thinking of the Magnitsky law, which he frequently raises in connection with Russia. I apologise for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), of course, has personal experience of providing support in circumstances where we need to provide humanitarian aid and support to people. The matter will be taken up by the United Nations, of course; the role that the United Kingdom can play will be a matter for consideration and discussion under the UN’s auspices.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Towards the end of the Prime Minister’s remarks, she talked in quite broad terms about the kind of mature, co-operative relationship that she wants for Britain outside the European Union. Which of the deals for European countries that are not in the European Union does the deal that she wants for Britain most closely resemble?

The Prime Minister: I have said consistently that we are not looking to try to duplicate or replicate a model that is there for some other country within Europe. What we will be doing is negotiating the deal that is right for the UK, and we will be ambitious in doing so.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): While strongly commending the pivotal role that Britain is playing in Lebanon, Jordan and other neighbouring states in coping with the miserable outflow from Syria, may I urge my right hon. Friend that a high priority in our dealings with the incoming Administration in Washington must be tackling the growing military hegemony of Russia and its ally Iran in that region?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we look very seriously at the actions of Russia. As I indicated earlier in response to the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), it is important that we look at the actions of Russia across a whole range of activities that it is now involved in. One of the significant elements of the conclusions of the European Council was that it now also identified Iran as backing the Assad regime. That is a very important step forward and we should continue to make the point that it is not just Russia; it is Iran as well.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is very welcome that the UN Security Council has unanimously voted to approve UN personnel in Syria. What diplomatic role does the Prime Minister think Europe could play in ensuring that the evacuation and humanitarian aid for Aleppo. However, there is a lot more to be done if we are going to get a stable and peaceful Syria for its people in the future.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am very glad to hear about the additional aid being granted to Syrian refugees massing at the Jordanian border, but what pressure or assistance are European leaders agreeing to use to help Jordan to process the hundreds of thousands of refugees trapped in the no man’s land—the Berm—between Syria and Jordan?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, part of the work that we are doing as the United Kingdom, and that other individual member states are doing, is putting aid into countries like Jordan to help them in dealing with those refugees—particularly those refugees who are already in Jordan. As I indicated, some of the money that we will be making available will be specifically for those who are now massing on the Jordanian border.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her thoughtful statement. Does she agree that “Brexit means Brexit” means that we leave the EU and all the EU regulations? Does she agree that is the certainty that this country is looking for?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for repeating that Brexit means Brexit—it does indeed. On the EU regulations, it is important that, at the point at which we leave the EU, EU regulations are brought into UK domestic law. It will then, of course, be open to this Parliament to decide which of those regulations it wishes to continue with and which it wishes to change.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): On the citizens who have come to live in the UK, does the Prime Minister agree that the
principle of protecting those who make a positive contribution to our communities should be a core responsibility of her Government?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the positive contribution that is made by EU citizens living here in the United Kingdom. I have said on many occasions that I expect to be able to, and wish to be able to, guarantee their status here in the UK, but we do need reciprocity—we need to have care and concern for UK citizens who are living in the European Union.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Did the Prime Minister have any discussions with her counterparts on the principle of protecting those who make a positive contribution to our communities should be a core responsibility of her Government?

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Did the discussions the Prime Minister had with her European counterparts touch on the exchange rate for sterling, and how many euros did she get for her pounds on her trip?

The Prime Minister: No, we did not discuss that.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): It is characteristically modest of the Prime Minister to mention only an extra £20 million of practical support. As it is the festive season, perhaps she could talk a little more about all the other things that we are funding in that region.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to do so. I will not list everything that we are funding. As I have said, we are making a contribution that has now committed £2.3 billion to help Syrian refugees. That is about medical supplies, it is about water, and it is about the opportunity for young people to be educated. Some £10 million of the £20 million that I indicated earlier will be for those who are now massing on the Jordanian border—so very specifically for those who are vulnerable as a result of the most recent actions that have been taken. It is right that we are putting this support in, and the House should be proud of the efforts that this country has undertaken to support Syrian refugees.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): A major poll last week in Wales noted that the overwhelming Brexit priority of the people of my country was to put continued single market membership over controls on immigration. If the Prime Minister intends to abandon the single market, will she support sub-state membership status for Wales to ensure that the Welsh economy is not shackled to a sinking UK ship?

The Prime Minister: It is the United Kingdom that will be leaving the EU, and it is the United Kingdom that will be negotiating the deal that we have for leaving the European Union, but we will be working with the devolved Administrations and taking into account the particular priorities that they have. But I repeat what I said earlier: the hon. Gentleman makes a reference to what is essentially a means or a process in relation to trading; what we want to focus on is the outcome we want, which is the best possible deal for trading with, and operating within, the single European market.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on her determination to raise the issue of reciprocal rights despite the fact that it was not formally on the agenda? She is right: this is an issue of serious concern for EU citizens living here and our citizens living in Europe. May I also congratulate her on raising this with individual member states as well? May I urge her to continue with these talks and ensure that we put people first, before process?

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that I will continue to do that and continue to press for these matters to be looked at at an early stage in the negotiations to give people the reassurance that they want.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): The negotiations of immediate concern to many of my constituents relate to the unification of Cyprus. Can the Prime Minister confirm whether the European Union will be present at the multi-party talks on 12 January? When she, or the Foreign Secretary, attends those talks, will she ensure that the UK finally fulfils its historical legal duty to guarantee the independence of Cyprus?

The Prime Minister: We recognise the importance of the talks that are taking place. The UK’s position is very simple. As a guarantor, we stand ready to do what is necessary to play our part, but it is important that that is primarily led by the two leaders, who have pushed these discussions in Cyprus under the auspices of the United Nations. We do therefore stand ready to attend the talks on 12 January. The European Union, which currently has observer status in these matters, has also indicated its readiness to be present. We are all saying that we will be present if that is going to aid coming to a settlement. We must focus not on whether we want to be there but on the result that we are going to get. The aim must be to see a settlement and reunification.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes—a notable legal egghead: Mr Robert Neill.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

It is accepted that business wishes to see the maximum possible certainty in which to make its investment decisions. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that certainty is not achieved by equivocation or obfuscation about our intention to trigger article 50, but is better served by triggering it promptly and then being flexible and business-focused in the terms of our negotiation and the implementation of the final deal?
The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. That is precisely why I indicated in October that we would trigger article 50 by the end of March to give people some certainty about the timetable. He is also absolutely right that we need the maximum flexibility thereafter in order to ensure that we can meet business needs and the needs of the UK generally.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Prime Minister’s approach is absolutely right, especially for constituents whose jobs depend on trade and investment, and students or residents from the European Union, who want us to focus on the key ingredients of success. Does she agree that her pragmatic focus on outcomes is much more likely to unify the country than some political parties’ determination to define Brexit as a boiled egg, whether soft or hard?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. I think that the British people want us to get on with it—to do the deal and get a good deal for the United Kingdom, and that is exactly what we want to do.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I would not expect the Prime Minister to comment on today’s events, but was there a discussion at the European Council on how the European Union will work to maintain the stability of Turkey, not just as a key NATO ally but as an applicant country?

The Prime Minister: There was some discussion, notably in the context of the migration deal with Turkey, about the relationship with Turkey. As I indicated in response to an earlier question, that relationship is important. The EU-Turkey deal on migration has led to a significant reduction in the number of people crossing from Turkey into Greece. However, we need to ensure that the deal is being properly undertaken. That is why we are giving some extra support to Greece. Other aspects of the deal, such as visa liberalisation, are for the Schengen member states to consider, not for the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, we are all very clear about the significance of Turkey and its relationship with the EU.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I very much welcome the Prime Minister’s statement. Paragraph 26 of the communiqué talks about “condemning” the actions of the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran. Apart from condemning, was there a strategy to look at countering the Iranian aggression in Syria and destabilising activity in the wider region?

The Prime Minister: First, it was very important that the conclusions that came out of the Council identified Iran, as well as Russia, as being one of the backers of the Syrian regime. It was in the context of condemning what had taken place in Aleppo that that was specifically raised.

As regards Iran more generally and, indeed, what is happening in Syria more generally, of course we continue as a European Union and as a United Kingdom to look for ways to put pressure on those who are backing President Assad, to ensure that we can do what I think everybody in the EU wants, which is to move to a peaceful and stable Syria with a political transition and a proper political process for doing that. That means continued pressure on Russia and Iran.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): May I also congratulate the Prime Minister on her calm and measured approach to EU-UK relations since taking office? Given that the UK Government dedicated resources to understanding the UK-US position with regard to both the Trump and the Clinton campaigns, will she confirm that we will dedicate resources to understanding not just governing parties, but potential governing parties in the EU, in order to help our renegotiation process?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we are in discussions with a number of people to ensure that we understand the approach that is being taken in other member states by various parties. This is not just about political parties, though; it is also about understanding business and other interests in the member states with which we are negotiating. That will make us better able to come to a deal that is good not only for the United Kingdom, which, as I have said, is the deal that we want, but is good for the EU, because I think that a deal that is good for the UK will be good for the EU as well.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government’s priorities in Syria must extend beyond vital humanitarian aid, to preparing a post-conflict political settlement and a reconstruction plan that will benefit the citizens of Syria and help bring stability to the middle east?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, bringing peace and stability to Syria and, therefore, helping that part of the process of bringing stability to the middle east is important. I apologise to my hon. Friend, because I was just looking at what I believe is breaking news that the Russian ambassador to Turkey has been shot. That has yet to be confirmed, but it is a matter of concern.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Inevitably, in the months ahead there will be a great deal of speculation about the precise nature of the deal that will be made when we leave the European Union, but will my right hon. Friend confirm that when we leave, the European Court of Justice will no longer have any jurisdiction over this country?

The Prime Minister: This is an issue on which my hon. Friend has campaigned for a considerable time. Part of the vote that people took was about this Parliament determining laws here in the United Kingdom, and that means not being under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): A diplomat friend of mine from Sweden told me last week that it is not just the budget that they will miss after Brexit. They will also miss the English nationals—the British nationals—who work for the European Union, who he says are organised, systematic and imaginative, and provide quite a contrast to many of the others who work for the secretariat. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing them well for the future and, I guess, a happy Christmas?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to do so. There are many excellent British officials working inside the European Union, including, of course, our commissioner, Sir Julian King, who has a very important portfolio on
security matters. I certainly wish them all well for the future, and I wish them and the whole House a very happy Christmas.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Would we be prepared to spend more than 2% of GDP on defence—on carrier battle group support, for example—to underpin security in Europe and elsewhere as part of the constructive ongoing relationship between the EU and the UK?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we have the commitment to spending 2% of GDP on defence, and that is an important commitment that we have given. I understand that the support will be there for the carriers. I think it is right that we encourage others within the European Union and within NATO to increase their spending to the same sort of level.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Shortly before the Council met, the 15th round of the EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership talks ended, predictably enough, once again in stalemate. At the same time, the prospects for a bilateral UK-US deal appear to be on the rise—a deal that would not compromise sovereignty between our two nations and that would not require a new supranational body to organise disputes, because we respect each other’s legal systems. Will my right hon. Friend make such a deal the heart of our relationship with the incoming Administration?

The Prime Minister: First, for as long as we continue to be a member of the European Union, we will continue to press the advantages of the TTIP deal and encourage discussions on TTIP. But, yes, I am looking forward to discussions with the United States of America about the possibilities of a trade deal that we will be able to have with them in due course.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): In Libya there seems to be instability in Tripoli, but there seems to be stability in Benghazi. Were there any discussions at the European Council towards helping to stabilise the situation, so that there is no migration of people from Libya?

The Prime Minister: There was some discussion of Libya, because of the recognition that it plays an important role in relation to the migration of people from the rest of Africa across the Mediterranean into Italy. Of course, Royal Naval vessels have been in the Mediterranean saving people’s lives, and they continue to be there. They are also, as I indicated in my statement, training the Libyan coastguard, which is an important part of the process of preventing that migration from taking place. It is important that we have the Government of National Accord in Libya and that we are able to interact with that Government. We would encourage, and we wish to see, stability across Libya so that we can further ensure that we are dealing with this issue of migration.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Elizabeth Truss): With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the serious disturbance at HMP Birmingham on Friday. I begin by paying tribute to the bravery and dedication of the prison officers who resolved this difficult situation. I also want to give thanks to West Midlands police, who supported the Prison Service throughout the day, and to the ambulance crews and the fire service, which also provided assistance. This was a serious disturbance. I have ordered a full investigation, and I have appointed Sarah Payne, adviser to the independent chief inspector of probation and former director of the Welsh Prison Service, to lead this work. I do not want to prejudge the outcome of the investigation.

As we currently understand it, at 9.15 am on Friday at HMP Birmingham, six prisoners in N wing climbed on to netting. When staff intervened, one of them had their keys snatched. At that point, staff withdrew for their own safety. Prisoners gained control of the wing and subsequently of P wing. G4S immediately deployed two tornado teams. At 11.20 am, gold command was opened, and a further seven tornado teams were dispatched to the prison.

At 1.30 pm, prisoners gained access to two more wings. Gold command made the decision that further reinforcements were needed and dispatched an additional four tornado teams to the prison. At 2.35 pm, the police and Prison Service secured the perimeter of all four wings, which remained secure throughout the day. Shortly after 3 pm, there were reports of an injured prisoner. Paramedics and staff tried to intervene but were prevented from doing so by prisoners.

During the afternoon, a robust plan was prepared to take back control of the wings, minimising the risk to staff and prisoners. It is important in this type of situation to make sure that the right resources are in place before acting. At 8.35 pm, 10 tornado teams of highly trained officers swept through the wings. Shortly after 10 pm, the teams had secured all four wings. The prisoner who had been reported injured was treated by paramedics and taken to hospital, along with two other prisoners. Throughout the day, the prisons Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah)—and I chaired regular cross-Government calls to make the necessary preparations and ensure that the Prison Service had all the support it needed. I want to thank the tornado teams, prison officers and emergency services for their exemplary work.

As I have said previously, levels of violence are too high in our prisons. We also have very worrying levels of self-harm and deaths in custody. That is why we are reforming our prisons to be safe and purposeful places, and taking swift action to deal with drugs, drones and phones. It is important to remember that these problems have developed over a number of years, and it will take time and concerted effort to turn this situation around.

While the reforms take hold, we are continually working to reduce risk and ensure stability across the prison estate. The Prison Service is leading gold command to collect intelligence, to deploy resources and, in particular,
to manage the movement of prisoners. That includes managing two incidents at Hull yesterday morning, which were quickly dealt with by staff. To date, we have moved 380 prisoners out of Birmingham, and we continue to assess the level of damage on the wings. The prisons Minister chairs daily meetings with the chief executive and senior members of the Prison Service to monitor prisons for risk factors that might indicate the potential for violence and unrest. Where necessary, we are providing governors with immediate and targeted support, ranging from extra staff and resources through to the transfer of difficult prisoners and speeding up repairs to or replacements of facilities.

As we manage the difficult current situation, we are implementing our reform programme, which will reduce violence and cut the £15 billion cost of reoffending, as laid out in the White Paper. In September, we rolled out tests for dangerous psychoactive drugs in prison; we are the first country to do so. We are rolling out new technology, starting with three prisons, to prevent mobile phone use. We are recruiting for a new £3 million national intelligence unit to crack down on gang crime. We are increasing staffing levels by 2,500 officers, and we are taking steps to train and retain our valued staff, including a new apprenticeship programme, a graduate entry scheme, fast-track promotions and retention payments. We are putting an extra £100 million into that. We are modernising our estate, with a £1.3 billion investment programme, and we are empowering governors to manage their regimes locally to get people off drugs, get them the skills they need and get them into work. Importantly, for the first time ever, we will make it clear in the prison and courts Bill next year that the purpose of prisons is not just to house prisoners, but to reform them. Together, these reforms are the right way to address issues in prisons so that they become purposeful places, where offenders get off drugs and get the education and skills they need to find work and turn their backs on crime for good.

The issues in our prisons are long-standing ones, and they are not going to be completely solved in weeks or even months. We are working to ensure that our prisons are stable while we deliver our reforms. Of course, this is a major task, but I am committed to it and so is the Prison Service, as I know are governors and prison officers as well. The next few months will be difficult, but I am confident that we can turn this situation around. We can turn our prisons into places of safety and reform, and this is my absolute priority as Secretary of State. I commend this statement to the House.

5.3 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of her statement. I want to pay tribute to the tornado teams, the prison officers and the emergency services, but the Secretary of State has a prisons crisis on her hands, and it would be helpful if she finally admitted this to the House and to her colleagues. Is it not about time that the Secretary of State starting listening to prison officers on the front line?

The issues in our prisons are long-standing ones, and they are not going to be completely solved in weeks or even months. We are working to ensure that our prisons are stable while we deliver our reforms. Of course, this is a major task, but I am committed to it and so is the Prison Service, as I know are governors and prison officers as well. The next few months will be difficult, but I am confident that we can turn this situation around. We can turn our prisons into places of safety and reform, and this is my absolute priority as Secretary of State. I commend this statement to the House.

Elizabeth Truss: Since I was appointed Secretary of State for Justice in July, I have been absolutely clear that we need to improve safety in our prisons and that the officers are leaving the service in such great numbers that 8,000 will need to be recruited to meet the Secretary of State’s 2,500 target.

The Secretary of State has questions to answer, and so do the Government as a whole. When the independent monitoring board said back in October that an urgent solution was needed to the prevalence of synthetic drugs in Birmingham prison, what action did the Secretary of State take? How much has Friday’s disorder cost, and who is footing the bill for the damage? Will G4S be reimbursing the public purse for the use of public sector staff to sort out the disorder? Does the Secretary of State think it is acceptable that private sector prisons do not have to reveal staffing levels in the way that prisons in the public sector do? If, like me, she does not believe it is acceptable, is she going to do anything about it? Does she regret her vitriolic attack on prison officers in the Chamber on 15 November? It even shocked many of her colleagues. Is it not about time that the Secretary of State starting listening to prison officers on the front line?

Of all prisons in 2015, Birmingham had the highest number of assaults on staff. There were 164 assaults on staff in 2015 alone. The Prison Officers Association, the Public and Commercial Services Union and the Prison Governors Association have warned of this crisis since 2010. It is about time that fundamental questions were asked about the way our prison system is working—or not working. The Secretary of State needs to consider whether or not it is right that private companies such as G4S at Birmingham or Sodexo at Northumberland, where there are also big problems, should be making profit from prisons and from society’s ills.

The Secretary of State needs to turn her mind to the fact that where rehabilitation fails and prison education is cut, reoffending rises. This is a failure to protect society. Privatisation of the probation service, savage cuts to prison staffing, overcrowding in our prisons and cuts to through-the-gate services all stop prison working and put the public at avoidable and increased risk. The Secretary of State should admit that in her overcrowded, understaffed prisons, shorter-sentence prisoners are leaving prison with drug addictions that they did not have when they went in and are leaving more likely to commit more serious crimes than those they were put away for in the first place. This is not protecting society; it is endangering society.

Such is the crisis in our prisons that the Secretary of State needs to develop an open mind on the future of our prisons. Is there anything we can learn from how prisons work in other countries? Perhaps we can learn from some of the experiences in Norway and elsewhere. But one thing is for sure: the USA model of huge, privately run super-prisons is not the way to go.

To conclude, 380 prisoners have been transferred from HMP Birmingham. Where have they been transferred to? Is G4S back running things in Birmingham now? Will the Government review the role of G4S and private companies in running our prisons? Does the Secretary of State finally realise that it was wrong and dangerous to cut 6,000 front-line prison staff in the first place? The crisis in our prisons is a symptom of a failing Government who have lost control.
levels of violence we currently have are unacceptable. We are investing a further £500 million over the next three years, which was announced in the autumn statement, as part of our prison safety and reform plan to do just that.

The hon. Gentleman talked about psychoactive drugs and asked what we had done about them. We have put in place tests to detect those drugs and also trained up officers to detect them. We have rolled that out across the prison estate. We are also rolling out new measures to deal with mobile phones and investing in a £3 million intelligence unit.

The most important thing is our staff. I have huge respect for prison officers and their work. That is why we are strengthening the front line by 2,500 officers. That will ensure that we have one officer for every six prisoners, which will enable us not only to make prisons safer, but to turn lives around. We are getting a new apprenticeship scheme and creating a fast track so that we train existing officers and get them promotion within the service. That is a long-term programme—we are taking immediate action but hon. Members need to recognise that it will take time to bring those people online and get them trained up. In the meantime, we are ensuring that there is a full investigation at HMP Birmingham. There is a full police investigation and the perpetrators of the incident will feel the full force of the law. The reality is that their actions put both staff and prisoners at risk.

The hon. Gentleman asked about G4S. It will cover the cost of what happened at HMP Birmingham, including the resources employed by the public sector, but we need to be honest that this is a problem across our prison estate—we have seen issues at our private sector prisons and our public sector prisons. That is why our staff investments will be across the board, and why our reform measures and increased transparency, which the hon. Gentleman asked about, will apply to both public sector and private sector prisons.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the prison population. The reality is that it rose by 23,000 under the Labour Government between 1997 and 2010. It has been stable under this Government since 2010. He talked about short-sentence prisoners. The number of short-sentence prisoners has actually gone down by 1,500 since 2010; the increases have been in the number of, for example, sex offenders rightly being put away for those heinous crimes.

We are reforming our prisons but it will take time. We have the right measures in place to turn the tide, and we need to turn our prisons into places of safety and reform. We have taken immediate action to reduce risk across the estate, but everyone in the House must recognise that it will take time to ensure that our prisons become the places we want them to be.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and her frankness about the seriousness of the situation, which does her credit. I join her in paying tribute to the professionalism of prison staff, especially the tornado teams and others who operated very efficiently. She is right to say that the problem has built up over many years, and it is one for which all parties must accept a measure of responsibility.

Will she ensure that the report not only looks at the immediate issues that arise from what has happened in Birmingham prison, but learns the broader lessons about how best to deal with dispersing disruptive prisoners; how to deal with pressures on the estate under those circumstances; how to deal with contractual difficulties with repairs on the estate, which sometimes create tensions; and how to deal sensibly with the problem of retaining experienced officers? I have just received an email from a prison officer indicating that one reason he is leaving after years of service is the failure of senior management to listen consistently to the concerns of officers on the line. Can we learn those lessons so that we can turn the tide around, which will take time?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is the illustrious Chair of the Select Committee covering these matters, and that he does not wish any concept which at any time might be in any way material to be excluded from his interrogation, but I advise other Members that, although they may seek to emulate his erudition, they should not seek to rival his length.

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right—those issues will be looked at in the investigation that is taking place. On staff retention, we are working on retention bonuses and on giving governors additional powers, but I can assure him that I have asked for further investigation into precisely how we improve retention. The prisons Minister and I have been meeting prison officers around the country and listening to their concerns on career progression and training, and we will take action on them.

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): To those of us who have been following the crisis in our prisons, nothing that happened in Winson Green in my constituency on Friday came as a shock. The independent monitoring board report on HMP Birmingham found that staff resource constraints gave “cause for concern” and that there was a lack of capacity to run the full prison regime. What action did the Secretary of State take when the report was published? Will that action, or lack of it, be part of the investigation she has now promised? Will she tell us whether there are other things that she knows about but as yet has failed to act upon?

Elizabeth Truss: I am very happy to have a discussion with the hon. Lady about HMP Birmingham specifically. Staff retention and issues with psychoactive substances are issues across the prisons estate. The prisons Minister has a daily meeting to look at stability and make sure that we are providing every governor, regardless of whether they are in the public or private sector, with the support they need.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Mobile telephones are used in prisons for the furtherance of crime and violence, and indeed for recording violence when it takes place. The Secretary of State hinted that there might have been some progress in stopping their use in prisons. Will she enlarge on that, please?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that alongside the rise in the use of psychoactive substances we have seen a rise in the use of mobile phones in prisons.
We have been working with the mobile phone companies on a technical solution, which is rolling out; we are starting to test it fully in three prisons. That will give us the means of preventing those crimes.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State further? When she received the report from the independent monitoring board, did she read it and take action, or do we have a situation in which we had the riots and then the warnings from the independent monitoring board, but nothing happened in between?

Elizabeth Truss: We read the reports of the independent monitoring board and take action. We read that report. The prisons Minister and I are in constant touch with governors on these specific issues.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Some reports suggest that up to 75% of the inmate population have one or more mental health problem. Does the Secretary of State agree that we are unlikely to be able to reform our prisons fundamentally until we get to grips with mental health in the criminal justice system?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have been discussing with the Health Secretary how we can improve mental health provision in prisons and in the criminal justice system overall. We are giving governors power over mental health commissioning jointly with the NHS to make sure that we have the right services in our prisons.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), did the Secretary of State read the report and take absolutely no action at all?

Elizabeth Truss: We are talking to governors across the estate, including the governor at HMP Birmingham. Many of our prisons face these issues. That is why we have already taken action on psychoactive substances, are taking action on mobile phones and are recruiting staff, including at HMP Birmingham.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): The matter of whether prisons are state-run or privatised is for another day, but for the record I believe they should be state-run. In my recent Adjournment debate I asked whether my right hon. Friend would introduce any new laws to act as a deterrent to prisoners—so that, for example, if they assaulted a prison officer, there would be an automatic extension to their sentence. I believe she was going to look at that. Will she inform the House of any moves being made on that?

Elizabeth Truss: I will look at the issue that my hon. Friend raises. The prison was put on lock down and was said to be on the brink of riot. Prison officers tell me that they are afraid to go to work. What can she do to assure the public and those prison officers that they are safe to go to work?

Elizabeth Truss: I have discussed with the head of the Prison Service the two specific incidents at Hull, which were dealt with. The issue is being dealt with across the board.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I welcome the Government’s commitment to closing old Victorian prisons that are now no longer fit for purpose and to investing unprecedented amounts of money to build new prisons. When will the Secretary of State be in a position to update us on which prisons will close and which new prisons will open?

Elizabeth Truss: We have a £1.3 billion building programme. The first prison, which will open in February next year, is HMP Berwyn. It will bring an additional 2,100 places, which will help to reduce overcrowding across the estate.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I understand, listening to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) about what happened in Hull, that the prisoners involved had been dispersed from Birmingham. Can the Secretary of State say something about her view on that dispersal policy and how well it is working?

Elizabeth Truss: Given the condition of the wings in HMP Birmingham, the Prison Service needed to disperse those individuals across the prison estate. The Prison Service, which is experienced in dealing with these issues, is managing that process very carefully. There were incidents at HMP Hull and they were dealt with. We are dealing with some very difficult individuals, but it is being looked at very, very closely.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned the discussion she was having with mobile phone providers. Is she doing the same with drone manufacturers?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is correct. We are working closely with drone manufacturers to create no-fly zones over prisons and deal with the scourge of contraband entering our prisons.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I can remember a time when a Minister coming before this House after such a serious incident might have had to show a degree of contrition. Since the Justice Secretary mentions staffing levels, can she confirm that G4S has made a profit at HMP Birmingham because it has reduced the number of experienced but more expensive staff and replaced them with cheaper but less experienced officers?

Elizabeth Truss: I have been very clear that we need experienced staff. In fact, 80% of staff working for the Prison Service have been with us for five or more years. I am very keen to ensure we retain them—we offer them promotion opportunities. Staffing levels are not set
by G4S. They are set by our overall prison policy, which I am changing to ensure they are sufficient. We are investing an extra £100 million a year in staffing to ensure we have the right staffing levels in both private and public sector prisons.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): We have already heard about the dramatic rise in psychoactive drug use, mobile phone use and the use of drones. I am told by my local prison officers that that is because prison officer levels have become dangerously low. Until we can recruit and train enough staff, what interim plans will there be?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We do not have sufficient staff in our prisons, which is why the Government are putting in additional investment. We started with 10 of our most challenging prisons, where we needed to recruit an extra 400 staff. We have already been able to put out 280 job offers, which shows that we can recruit. In 75% of our prisons we do not have a problem recruiting. In the areas where we do have a problem, we are offering extra retention payments to achieve our recruitment plans.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Our prisons have had 7,000 fewer prison officers since 2010: a cut of 28%. Two thirds of our prisons are overcrowded. We have seen disturbances at many prisons—not just at Birmingham, which we are discussing today—and the level of suicide in our prisons is at its highest for 25 years. That is a truly shameful record and we have seen very little remorse from the Secretary of State today. Will she now apologise?

Elizabeth Truss: I have been very clear about the issues in our prison system. Since I secured this role in July, I have been focused on dealing with them, making sure that we make our prisons safer, invest in prison staff and invest in mental health facilities in our prisons in order to deal with this situation.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In her statement, the Justice Secretary said that the prisons Minister chairs daily meetings with the chief executive of the Prison Service to monitor prisons for risk factors that might indicate potential violence and unrest. Why was the risk of serious violence at HMP Birmingham not raised in the relevant daily meeting, and if the biggest rise in violence in our prisons for 26 years was not raised, what is the point of having daily meetings?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I am sure he will recognise that with an operational service such as the Prison Service, we can reduce and minimise risk, but we cannot eliminate it completely. That is what the efforts of the daily meeting are about—reducing the level of violence and giving governors what they need to keep our prisons as safe as possible. When the incidents occurred, they were dealt with extremely effectively by the tornado teams. I want to see a more stable prison estate, which means building extra capacity so that we do not have overcrowding, and investing in staff so that our prisons can be staffed at a proper level. I have to tell Members that this will take time. While we are seeking to minimise risk, we cannot of course prevent every incident from happening.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Given that the level of assaults on staff and prisoners and that the level of disorder in prisons generally is higher in the private sector per 100 prisoners than it is in the public sector, will the Secretary of State tell us how many of these extra staff are going to be employed by the private sector, over whose recruitment she has no direct control?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. If he looks at the way we review prisons, he will find that the performance of the private and public sectors is relatively equivalent. There is not a significant difference between performance in the private and public sector. We set the levels of staff that the private sector has to employ. We are moving towards a 1:6 ratio in both the public and private sectors. All our evidence suggests that that will be enough to make sure that we keep prisons safe and, importantly, to reform prisoners to reduce the cost of reoffending.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Secretary of State said in her statement that these matters had been developing over a number of years, but is it not the case that between 1997 and 2010 there were no cat A escapes and no riots like the ones we have seen? Since that time, there have been two category A and many other escapes, record numbers of suicides and record numbers of homicides in our prisons. Why should we trust the right hon. Lady’s party to run the Prison Service?

Elizabeth Truss: I have said absolutely that we have seen significant rises in violence over recent years. That is why we launched the prison safety and reform plan. The first thing I did when I became Secretary of State was to make sure that we dealt with those issues. We have faced new challenges such as psychoactive drugs and mobile phones, which were not an issue before. I say to the right hon. Lady that since the inception of prisons we have not seriously impacted the reoffending rate, which is a challenge we face as a country. It is costing us £15 billion a year. It is important that we make our prisons safe, but also make them places of reform where we can reduce reoffending. Prisons need to follow both purposes.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): It is very clear that the Prison Service is in a state of acute crisis, and it is a pity that the Secretary of State is not willing to admit that. Why was G4S involved in staffing the prison in the first place? We should look at its past.

[ Interruption. ]

Mr Speaker: Order. I appreciate that the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), an illustrious Government Whip, is very excited in the approach to his wedding. I advise him that the descent on him of a Zen-like calm will aid his preparations.

Mr Winnick: G4S was the organisation that had to pay back £109 million to the Secretary of State’s own Department for overcharging. There were problems in the Medway secure training centre, the Yarl’s Wood immigration detention centre and many other cases where this organisation has been involved. It is time that G4S was told very clearly that it is no longer needed in our Prison Service.
Elizabeth Truss: I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that the decision to put HMP Birmingham out to private tender was a Labour decision, in 2009. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I appreciate that the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) is an illustrious former prisons Minister, eager to make his point with great force and alacrity—[Interruption.] Order. Mr Gyimah, I know that you are trying to aid matters, but you are disadvantaging me in seeking to facilitate good order. Your assistance might be required at some unspecified point in the future, but it is not required at the moment. We must hear the answers from the Secretary of State.

Elizabeth Truss: Let me also say to the hon. Gentleman that the underlying causes are the increase in psychoactive drugs, which the prisons and probation ombudsman has described as “a game-changer”; insufficient staff numbers, which I have addressed in the White Paper “Prison safety and reform”; increased use of mobile phones; and gangs, drugs and bullying. Those issues are common to both the public and private sectors, and they are the issues that the Government are addressing.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State now acknowledge that the root cause of these difficulties is the cutting of £700 million from the Prison Service since 2010? Will she now apologise to the House, and say that that was a false economy?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, since I started this job in July I have made clear that we need additional staff in our Prison Service to face new challenges such as psychoactive drugs, mobile phones and gangs. We are putting the money in—that was announced in the autumn statement—and we have a comprehensive programme for reform, but many of the problems in our prisons have existed for a decade. That is why, for the first time ever, we are making clear in legislation that reform is a key purpose of prison.

Mr Speaker: Before he beetles off to some other no doubt important commitment, let us hear the fellow from Wrexham.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker. You are most accommodating.

The Secretary of State has already mentioned HM Prison Berwyn in Wrexham, which will open in February next year and will be the largest prison in western Europe. In due course, 2,000 men will reside there. Will she meet me so that I can discuss with her the arrangements for the opening, to allay some of the concerns of my constituents, which, as she can imagine on a day like today, have risen somewhat?

Elizabeth Truss: I should be very pleased to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): If the Secretary of State is looking for some light reading over Christmas, she would do well to acquire a copy of a book by the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), “Doing Time: Prisons in the 21st Century”, which contains a number of ideas. If I heard you correctly, Mr Speaker, you mentioned the hon. Gentleman’s intended marriage. Perhaps, if the Secretary of State were able to buy a copy, that would help with the cost of the wedding.

There are currently 9,971 foreign nationals in our prisons. In order to reduce the prison population, what further steps are being taken to return them to their countries of origin?

Mr Speaker: Book sales will no doubt increase manifold.

Elizabeth Truss: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that the book already has pride of place on my bookshelf. I have read it thoroughly, and I recommend it to every Member in the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) is very committed to prison reform, so much so that he agreed to become a Whip in my Department to keep an eye on us and make sure that we are on the right track.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about foreign national offenders, and we are very much dealing with the issue.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): First the prison was taken over by G4S, and then it was taken over by the prisoners. The report on the prison by the Independent Monitoring Boards states explicitly that staff shortages are a major issue, observing that “on too many occasions, in many areas, the service was reduced by there being insufficient staff”.

That was the very theme of the report. Brutally, whose fault is this, the private operator’s or the Government’s?

Elizabeth Truss: Clearly, there are issues across our prison estate. There is not sufficient time out of cell, and that is one of the things we are going to be measuring in our new reform measures. We also do not have sufficient staff to be able to keep our prisons safe and reform offenders, which is what we need to do.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): It took three written parliamentary questions from me to get the Government to confess that only one prison in Britain was free of illegal drug use. It took a fourth question to get the information that that prison had no prisoners because it had closed down. This is symptomatic of the Government being in denial of the corruption and chaos in our prison service. Have not the Government’s policies for the past six years been, like the Minister’s statement today, evidence-free and ignorance-rich?

Elizabeth Truss: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his assiduousness in asking parliamentary questions, which have elicited an answer. If he reads the “Prison safety and reform” White Paper, he will see there is a whole section on how we deal with the issue of drugs: testing offenders on entry and exit, and making sure that governors are held accountable for getting people off drugs. That is the way we are going to crack this problem.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), the shadow Secretary of State, has pointed out, this is the worst prison disturbance since the Strangeways riot of 1990. The Woolf report on that riot recommended that “no establishment should hold more prisoners than is provided for in its certified normal level of accommodation”,

Mr Speaker: Order. I appreciate that the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) is an illustrious former prisons Minister, eager to make his point with great force and alacrity—[Interruption.]

Mr Gyimah, I know that you are trying to aid matters, but you are disadvantaging me in seeking to facilitate good order. Your assistance might be required at some unspecified point in the future, but it is not required at the moment. We must hear the answers from the Secretary of State.
but it is reported that HMP Birmingham was overcrowded by almost a third last year. Have this Government learnt no lessons at all from the riots of 26 years ago?

Elizabeth Truss: I have discussed the issue the hon. Lady mentions with Lord Woolf. She is right that the disturbance at HMP Birmingham was very serious; that is why we are investing £1.3 billion in our prison build programme to create extra capacity and eliminate overcrowding in the prison estate.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Howard League published a report in the summer indicating all Welsh prisons had seen a fall in the number of officers compared with last year, so what is the Secretary of State doing to ensure the Welsh prison estate is equipped with sufficient staff, especially as it is the policy of the UK Government to build in Wrexham a Titan prison, one of the largest in Europe, primarily, as she has said in this debate, to house prisoners from overcrowded prisons in England?

Elizabeth Truss: We have great recruitment plans and programmes in place. We have already recruited a significant number for the first 10 prisons, including one in Wales, and we will follow through with new apprenticeship programmes and graduate entry programmes and by making sure staff in our prison service are able to gain promotion and get the training they need to progress.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): John Thornhill, president of the National Council of Independent Monitoring Boards, says the boards are “frustrated” by the lack of response to the issues raised in their annual reports, so can the Secretary of State tell me three specific and substantive actions taken as a result of the relevant monitoring board’s latest annual report into Birmingham?

Elizabeth Truss: The White Paper is very clear about reforming and making sure IMB recommendations are taken seriously, and about working closely with Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons, because at the moment there is no duty for the Secretary of State to respond. We are putting that in place, to make sure it triggers action.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): How many staff were on duty when the riot started, and what is the Secretary of State’s estimate of the cost of the disturbance?

Elizabeth Truss: I have recounted the events of the day as far as we are aware of them, but there will be a full investigation that will make all those facts clear.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is a noted thespian and I know he will therefore greatly enjoy the warm acclamation he receives when he now rises again from his seat.

Stephen Pound: No one could seriously attempt to deny that there is something rotten in the prison estate in this country at the present time. However, I would like to give the Government credit for finally considering the issue of post-release employment. Many inmates believe that, when you ain’t got nothing, you’ve got nothing to lose. The Secretary of State has on her Benches probably the greatest expert in Parliament on that particular subject. Would she consider seconding the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson), to her Department—he might not thank me for my suggestion—to produce a report to the House in, say, six months’ time on what the Government are doing on post-release employment? The issue really is that crucial.

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that it is vital to ensure that people have a job to go to when they leave custody. I am already working closely with that Minister’s “family” on this, and the prisons Minister will publish a report on the issue next year. We are examining plans to ensure that governors are held accountable for their effectiveness in getting offenders from their prisons into work.

Mr Speaker: Order—

Mr Hanson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to seek clarification from the Minister, if I may.

Mr Speaker: I hope this is not a continuation of the debate, but the right hon. Gentleman has an honest face and I will give him a chance.

Mr Hanson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Lord Chancellor indicated that the Labour Government had privatised HMP Birmingham. Would she acknowledge, however, that the Ministry of Justice announced in March 2011 that G4S was to take over the prison? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman has made his own point in his own way. We must hear the response of the Secretary of State, if she wishes to offer one.

Elizabeth Truss: The point I made was that the decision to put HMP Birmingham out to tender was made by Labour. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is quite a lot of eccentric gesticulation going on, and the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) is shaking his head feverishly. I simply say to Members: consult the record. It will be very useful to read and digest the Official Report tomorrow morning over breakfast. The hon. Gentleman will probably find that therapeutic. I am grateful to the Secretary of State.
Yemen

5.41 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on an announcement that was made in Riyadh earlier today on the conflict in Yemen. In 2014, Houthi forces and those loyal to former President Saleh took over the capital, Sana’a, and forced out the Hadi Government. Houthi forces have subsequently attacked Saudi territory, shelling border villages daily and killing Saudi civilians. A 10-country Saudi-led coalition intervened to restore the Hadi Government, to deter further Houthi aggression and to defend the Saudi border. United Nations Security Council resolution 2216 condemned the Houthis’ actions. The United Kingdom fully supports both the coalition and the right of Saudi Arabia to defend itself. Instability in Yemen, where there is a long-standing al-Qaeda presence and a growing threat from Daesh—seen tragically in Aden this weekend—threatens not just the Gulf but our security in western Europe.

Concerns have been raised in this House and by non-governmental organisations about our export of military equipment to Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf. There have been allegations about breaches of international humanitarian law. As we operate one of the strictest arms export control regimes in the world, we take any such allegations very seriously and do our best to ensure that they are properly investigated by the coalition.

Following the air strike on the Great Hall in Sana’a on 26 October this year, for example, I spoke to the Saudi Defence Minister, the Foreign Secretary spoke to his counterpart, and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), travelled to Riyadh to underline our concerns in person. The coalition’s joint incidents assessment team—the JIAT—subsequently announced interim findings within a week. The coalition committed to review its rules of engagement and its command and control systems, and to take action against those held responsible. We acknowledge the progress they have made and look forward to the completed investigation of that incident.

The coalition continues to investigate other allegations. The findings of eight investigations were announced on 4 August and a further five on 6 December. We are pressing the coalition to complete all the remaining investigations as quickly as possible.

One specific allegation that UK-supplied cluster munitions were used in January this year was raised in this House on 24 May. The UK signed the convention on cluster munitions in 2008 and has not supplied any such weapons to Saudi Arabia since 1989—over a quarter of a century ago. Our initial view, as set out by the then Minister of State for Defence Procurement, the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), and based on the information we held at the time, was that a UK weapon had not been used, but we committed to analyse the allegation and to seek a full investigation by the coalition.

That investigation has now concluded. The coalition confirmed earlier today that a limited number of BL755 cluster munitions that were exported from the UK in the 1980s were dropped in Yemen, including by a coalition aircraft in the incident alleged by Amnesty International not far from the Saudi border. The coalition, whose members are not parties to the convention, has said that the munitions were used against a legitimate military target and did not therefore contravene international humanitarian law. However, Saudi Arabia has now confirmed that it will not further use BL755 cluster munitions. I welcome that.

This particular instance shows that, in complete contrast to Russian and Syrian air strikes, where allegations are made, and with our support, the Saudi-led coalition is prepared to investigate thoroughly, to publish the findings and to take action where appropriate. I assure the House that we will continue to keep current sales of military equipment to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf allies under review, in accordance with our arms export criteria. I commend this statement to the House.

5.47 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for advance sight of it. We are all deeply concerned about the ongoing conflict in Yemen and the dire humanitarian situation it has caused. As the House is aware, there have been widespread allegations that both sides in the conflict have violated international law. The latest revelation that UK-made cluster munitions have been used by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen is deeply worrying. Not only are such weapons immediately dangerous, but they come with a toxic legacy, lying on battlefields and threatening civilians, especially children, long after a conflict has ended.

In 2008, the previous Labour Government signed the convention on cluster munitions. The strikes that the Secretary of State has described today amount to the first confirmed use of UK-made cluster bombs since that date. Will the Secretary of State tell the House when he was first made aware of the possible use of such weapons by the coalition in Yemen? Why has it taken so long to confirm that those weapons were used?

A few days ago, the Obama Administration blocked the sale of guided-munitions kits over concerns about civilian casualties. That followed the United States blocking a sale of cluster munitions to Saudi Arabia. The Foreign Secretary said that the test for continued British arms sales “is whether those weapons might be used in a commission of a serious breach of international humanitarian law.”

I note that the Defence Secretary confirmed that a limited number of cluster munitions supplied by this country were dropped in Yemen by a coalition aircraft. Although the cluster munitions were exported in the 1980s, will the Government commit to examining whether their current policy needs to be changed? There have been wholly unacceptable actions, and this country cannot sit on its hands.

The Government have consistently rejected calls for an independent, United Nations-led investigation into possible breaches of humanitarian and international law in Yemen. In the light of what we have learnt today, I implore the Government to heed calls from Opposition Members, as well as from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee and the International Development Committee, to have an inquiry. We need such an inquiry so that we can have independent verification of the actions of both sides in this conflict.
Finally, on the humanitarian situation, will the Secretary of State set out what action is being taken to help the 14 million people in need of urgent food and the 13 million Yemenis who lack access to clean water? In particular, we would like to know what is being done to help those children who are suffering so desperately in this conflict.

**Sir Michael Fallon:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that. We all want to see this conflict brought to an end, and I hope we would be even-handed about that; more than 90 Saudi civilians have lost their lives in this conflict, through shelling over the border into Saudi Arabia, and more than 500, including women and children, have been injured. It is important that those things are set alongside other allegations of civilian casualties in Yemen itself.

The hon. Gentleman asked when we first became aware of this allegation. We were made aware of it in the spring. It was brought to the Floor of this House in May, and our analysis began. I wrote back to Amnesty at the end of June telling it that we had commenced work on our own analysis, but that could take us only so far, as the investigation itself was a matter for the Saudi authorities. That investigation continued throughout the autumn and has concluded only in the past few days. We, too, have been frustrated by the length of time it has taken, but the investigation has been carried out by the Saudis and it has now got us to the transparent admission that has been made this morning.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about the United States stopping the supply of munitions, and we should be careful here; the US has stopped only one munitions licence, and it continues to supply combat aircraft, attack helicopters and other munitions to Saudi Arabia. Only one licence has been paused. As he has described, we have a different process—an arms control process that we keep under continuous review. He asked what our current policy on cluster munitions weapons is. It is exactly the same as it was left under the Labour Government: we oppose the use of these cluster munitions. That is a result from this investigation set alongside other allegations of civilian casualties in Yemen.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked me about an independent inquiry. We have been clear throughout that an allegation such as this is, first, a matter for the independent inquiry. We have been clear throughout and the pressure we have been putting on them. The Saudis explained why they used these British-supplied weapons, presumably in the knowledge that it would cause considerable embarrassment to the British Government? What plans do the Saudis have to dispose of their remaining stocks?

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Have the Saudis explained why they used these British-supplied weapons, presumably in the knowledge that it would cause considerable embarrassment to the British Government? What plans do the Saudis have to dispose of their remaining stocks?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** The Saudis have made it clear that they used these munitions in a border area—just a few kilometres from the Saudi border—inside Yemen and they used them against a legitimate military target that may have been responsible for some of the attacks and deaths they had been suffering on their side of the border. They therefore state that, as they are not party to the convention, the use of these cluster munitions does not contravene international law. As for stocks, they have made it clear that they are not going to use UK-supplied cluster munitions in future, and we should all welcome that.

**Brendan O’Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Scottish National party Members have been clear for many, many months that there have been undeniable violations of international humanitarian law by Saudi Arabia in its conflict in Yemen. There is overwhelming evidence that the Saudis have been failing to conduct military operations lawfully, a situation that caused the US to join the Netherlands and Germany in suspending arms sales to Saudi Arabia very recently. Once again, the Saudi regime stands accused of routinely using cluster bombs against the Yemeni people; that is a weapon even this Government describe as “unjustifiable” because it is designed to kill and injure civilians. Today’s revelations are not particularly new, but unless the Government act immediately to end arms sales to Saudi Arabia the court of public opinion will find them guilty of collusion in violations of international humanitarian law.

I have a couple of questions: will the Secretary of State tell the House when he first saw the analysis confirming the UK cluster bomb? Is The Guardian article today correct in saying that he first saw it a month ago? If so, why is this House finding out only now, after it appeared in the press? His statement says that the cluster bombs were used against legitimate military targets and therefore did not contravene international humanitarian law, but how can we continue to do business with a regime that routinely uses cluster bombs against civilian populations? This country is a signatory to the treaty, which obliges us to stop other people using such munitions. Finally, what does a regime have to do—how many breaches of international humanitarian law must it commit?—before this Government deem it an unacceptable partner to deal in arms with?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** First, I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman was listening, as the United States has not suspended arms sales to Saudi Arabia—he is incorrect about that. The US has suspended one sale of munitions, but it continues to sell munitions generally to Saudi Arabia, and to supply aircraft and attack helicopters. Secondly, there is no evidence that cluster munitions have been routinely used in Yemen—on the contrary, this allegation stood out for what it is. It has been thoroughly investigated and, as a result of that investigation and of our pressure, we now have an undertaking that Saudi Arabia will not use cluster munitions of this kind in the future and indeed that it is now considering becoming a party to the convention.

The hon. Gentleman asked when I first became aware of the analysis that we were doing. My hon. Friend the then Minister for Defence Procurement told the House in May that we would look hard at this allegation, and we began our analysis, but of course we were not investigating this allegation; only the coalition could investigate it, because only the coalition had access to all the information that would be needed to see whether this particular allegation was justified. I concede that
the investigation has taken a long time, but we now have the result, and we have the admission from the Saudi authorities that cluster munitions were used, together with the undertaking that they will not be used in future.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Are the Saudis correct in seeing the existence of an Iranian-backed Houthi regime on their southern border as an existential threat to the Kingdom?

Sir Michael Fallon: In a word, yes. The Saudis are seeing villages being shelled on a daily basis from across their border. I have yet to hear any Opposition Member condemn that shelling or take any note of the innocent lives that have been lost on the Saudi side of the border, along with, of course, the innocent lives that have been lost in the conflict in Yemen. Absolutely, Saudi Arabia has the right to defend itself.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I am glad that Yemen is being discussed again in the House today, but I am sad and disappointed that we are doing so for these reasons. Of course I accept the assurances given by the Minister, and I know he will ensure that the Saudi Arabian Government will also keep to their promise, but what the people of Yemen need over the next few days is a ceasefire. We are seeing bombs, famine and cholera, and a country starving to death. It desperately needs that ceasefire. The Prime Minister said that the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who has done so much work on this issue, was in Riyadh yesterday. Can we therefore be given any further information as to how we can get this ceasefire, so that the aid can start getting through to save the people of Yemen before it is too late?

Sir Michael Fallon: The right hon. Gentleman’s approach is very constructive. I know of his interest: he chairs the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen. We are trying, as a Government, to do two things. First, to bring about the ceasefire that he seeks and we have all sought in Yemen, by getting the parties together. In the end, there has to be some kind of political settlement in Yemen, and we have been working towards that end.

Secondly, there is the issue that the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who was working on in Riyadh just yesterday. We urgently need to get the ports, including Hudaydah, properly open so that we can get humanitarian aid in—particularly for the civilian population, who so desperately need it now.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend talk a little about our relationship with Saudi Arabia and how it keeps our streets safer here?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes. Saudi Arabia is a key partner in our fight against terrorism. We depend on each other’s intelligence. There are terrorist plots to this country of which we have been forewarned by Saudi Arabia. It is essential for our own security that we keep our relationship with Saudi Arabia in good repair.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I am sorry to say this, but for those of us with long memories, this is a reminder of the sort of discussions we used to have on arms to Iraq. Eventually, through the Scott inquiry, we found that Ministers had misled us; I will not put it any stronger than that. Those who were here at that time should reflect on the kind of answers that were given to us. We knew what was going on in Iraq. We know what is going on in Yemen. How can we possibly support continuing to send arms to Saudi Arabia that are being used in that country?

Sir Michael Fallon: As somebody who was here part of the time during that process, I certainly recall the very close attention that the House eventually paid to the sale of arms to Iraq. We have, partly as a result of exactly what happened in the 1980s, a very tough arms export control regime. We keep our arms sales under continuous review. We weigh up each successive licence when it is brought before Ministers. But we also need to be very clear that Saudi Arabia has the right to defend itself and that it is quite legitimately answering the call of the legitimate Government of Yemen in coming to their aid.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Earlier, I was a little surprised to hear that it is almost three decades since we last sold cluster munitions to Saudi Arabia. It was also heartening to hear that it has agreed to use them no longer. Will my right hon. Friend say whether, since we signed the convention in 2008, any UK personnel have been involved in supporting continued maintenance or given other support to enable the Saudis to use their cluster munitions?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that very specific assurance: no United Kingdom personnel have been involved in the storage, transport, maintenance or deployment of any cluster munitions in Saudi Arabia.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am sure that everyone in the House would condemn the murder of Saudi civilians as they do Yemeni civilians, but what we are talking about is the sale of UK weapons to Saudi. How many times have cluster munitions been dropped? Have they been dropped on any occasions by UK-supplied aircraft? Is the UK satisfied that all those targets were legitimate military targets, and what was the UK involvement in the targeting?

Sir Michael Fallon: We are only aware of this single allegation that has now been fully investigated by the Saudi authorities: a single allegation that cluster munitions were used in this particular incident around the turn of the year. As the Saudis have made clear today, they had been dropped by a coalition aircraft. I am sorry; what was the right hon. Gentleman’s second question?

Tom Brake: Is the UK satisfied that all those targets were legitimate military targets and what was the UK involvement in the targeting?

Sir Michael Fallon: The Saudi authorities have said today that these munitions were used against a legitimate military target in the border area on the Yemeni side of...
the Saudi border. On UK involvement, we are not involved in approving or selecting targets for the coalition in Yemen.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Iran, North Korea, Cuba: we see what happens when countries are shunned by the international community. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is positive engagement through our diplomatic service with our ally, Saudi Arabia, that will influence this process—not shunning it, as some on the Labour Benches suggest?

Sir Michael Fallon: Exactly. There is nothing to be gained from shunning or boycotting Saudi Arabia. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia is on the cusp of enormous social and economic reforms. As well as being a key security, trading and investment partner in our own country, Saudi Arabia is now on the cusp of a major reform programme of its economy and society. We ought to be playing our part in that rather than constantly cavilling from the sidelines.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State be very clear? On what specific date did the Saudis inform him or his other ministerial colleagues that they had in fact used UK cluster munitions in Yemen? Given the wide range of other allegations that still do not have any answers—in fact, Médecins sans Frontières is already questioning some of the Joint Incidents Assessment Team investigations—why should we trust that Saudi Arabia has in fact conducted operations lawfully and appropriately?

Sir Michael Fallon: The official confirmation about this particular allegation has come today—this afternoon—from Riyadh. I thought it right that Parliament should be informed as soon as that announcement was made in Riyadh. Other allegations are outstanding and we continue to press the Saudi authorities to get those investigations wrapped up, publish the findings and then take action if there are weaknesses in their command and control procedures, to get them remedied. It is only through that that they will continue to demonstrate that the assurances they give us and their other allies are properly valid.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What analysis has the Defence Secretary made of the humanitarian consequences of the illicit redistribution of cluster munitions, including BL.755, from chaotic, failed and post-conflict states, on civilian populations throughout the middle east and north Africa, and much further afield?

Sir Michael Fallon: Clearly, we oppose the use of cluster munitions. We do not keep records of how the stocks that may have been accumulated by countries in the middle east have later been distributed or sold on, but clearly we oppose their use in any conflict now.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, but it is simply not the case that these British-made cluster munitions were used against a legitimate military target. They were dropped on farmland in northern Yemen, creating de facto minefields that have killed and injured civilians. It has taken more than six months for the Saudi-led coalition to admit using them. Why does the Secretary of State now give it the benefit of the doubt over their use when such breaches of international humanitarian law are being alleged?

Sir Michael Fallon: I have seen no evidence that the dropping of this particular munition has resulted in any civilian casualties. On the contrary, this was a munition that, from all accounts, had not in fact exploded—probably because of its obsolescence; it was a very old weapon. However, if the hon. Lady has evidence that any civilians have been killed or injured, we would very much like to see it.

As I have made clear, the investigation has taken a while. We have continued to press the Saudis on the fact that when something such as this is alleged, they need to be as transparent as possible, get on with the investigation and reassure their allies by simply publishing the findings, and, if something went wrong, then admitting it went wrong and putting it right. That is not what happens when we consider the Russian bombing of completely innocent civilians in Aleppo.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement to the House today. Will he say a few words on the regional situation that has led to this conflict? Clearly, the Iranian invasion in Yemen is causing many of the issues. While he is talking about the regional situation, will he join me in offering condolences to the family of Russia’s ambassador to Turkey, Ambassador Karlov, who was tragically murdered today? Does he agree that, just because we condemn Russian violence in Aleppo, that does not mean we support other violence against Russia in other parts of the world?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am sure the House will join my hon. Friend and me in condemning the murder of the Russian ambassador to Turkey—a shocking act involving a diplomat, who should otherwise, of course, enjoy proper protection, and whose murder does not bring any conflict in the middle east closer to resolution. There are, however, too many states in the middle east that are acting beyond their borders—such as Iran, clearly involved behind the scenes in Yemen in prolonging a conflict that only perpetuates the suffering of the Yemeni people.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I commend the Defence Secretary for making a statement rather than being dragged here to answer an urgent question. That is an important part of the way we do our business, and I commend him for it.

I support what the Defence Secretary says about Saudi Arabia having the right to defend itself, but surely not at any cost and not in any way—that is all we are trying to get at. When the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), who is an honourable man, and who I do not think for an instant wanted to mislead the House, said in May that, based on all the information available to us, including sensitive coalition operational reporting, we assess that no UK-supplied cluster weapons have been used.”—[Official Report, 24 May 2016; Vol. 611, c. 401.]

had he been lied to by our coalition allies, and, if so, can we really trust anything the Saudis say today?
Sir Michael Fallon: No, as I made clear, that was his view at the time, based on the only information that we had available. That was long before the investigation that has concluded today had properly started. That was the best information he had at the time.

On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, yes, the purpose of international humanitarian law is to recognise that states do have the right to defend themselves, but they have to do so in a way that is necessary and proportionate, that avoids hitting the sick or the wounded and that properly distinguishes between combatants and non-combatants. That is the basis of international humanitarian law. Now, the Saudis believe—he may not accept this—that, in this particular instance, they did respect international humanitarian law.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many BL755 cluster munitions were exported from this country to Saudi Arabia before 1989, what is their shelf life and how many were used in this particular incident?

Sir Michael Fallon: I do not have to hand—and I am not sure, indeed, that we still have—the records from right back to the 1980s as to exactly how many cluster munitions were exported. I am sorry to tell my hon. Friend that I am not so much of an expert as to know the precise obsolescence of this particular weapon. I am told it would have been getting pretty obsolete now, but if he will allow me, I will write to him on both those technical points.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I, too, welcome the Minister’s statement? When I was on the Defence Committee, we, along with the Chairman, who is sitting here as well, attended a joint meeting of the Committees on Arms Export Controls, which some of the Ministers here were at as well. We were assured that if evidence was proven to be true, action would be taken. The proof has been provided by the Minister today in his statement. What action—what sanctions—will be taken against Saudi Arabia? Is it too much to ask that the blanket, indiscriminate bombing of Yemeni civilians—the murder of innocents—should stop immediately?

Sir Michael Fallon: As I have made clear throughout this evening, there are innocents being killed on both sides in this terrible conflict, and there are Saudi innocent civilians who are being killed by Houthis through the shelling and constant attacks across the Saudi-Yemeni border. The hon. Gentleman asks what action we are taking. We are the ones who have pressed for this allegation to be properly investigated, and although it may not satisfy him, we have the result today—we have a decision by the Saudi Government that they will no longer use cluster munition weapons. That is a result for us.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What implications would it have for Britain if we did not have a close relationship with Saudi Arabia?

Sir Michael Fallon: We would certainly be weakened in our fight against terrorism. Our security services would lose the co-operation we have with the Saudi authorities. But more than that, Saudi is an investor in our country, it is a key trade partner of ours in the Gulf, and it is an important ally in securing the stability we all want to see in the middle east.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Secretary of State continues to use the word “allegation”, but this is no longer an allegation—it is a proven fact that a British cluster bomb has been used in the conflict in Yemen. Given that it has taken seven months for the Saudi Arabian authorities to, in his words, be “transparent”, is he honestly saying that the Government’s sanction on Saudi Arabia is merely to accept its reassurance?

Sir Michael Fallon: The hon. Gentleman is right that from today we should probably describe this as a fact rather than an allegation. I was calling it an allegation because that is what it was when it was first brought before this House back in May, but now we have the confirmation from Saudi Arabia that coalition aircraft did drop one of these cluster munitions around the turn of the year. As far as sanctions are concerned, it is this country, as I have said, that has pressed for all these allegations—some of them are still allegations—to be properly investigated, for the findings to be published and, where necessary, for evidence to be provided by the Saudi coalition authorities that changes have been made in their command-and-control, rules-of-engagement or targeting procedures. Those are the results that we want to see.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am pleased to hear the news that Saudi is no longer using cluster munitions, but will the Government also encourage the Saudis to destroy any remaining cluster munitions they have?

Sir Michael Fallon: I can tell my hon. Friend that we have put that request to the Saudi Government, and I hope they will accept that suggestion of hers and ours.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Yemen is said to be one step away from famine, so can our Government help to open the ports and the airports so that humanitarian aid can be shipped to its people?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes. The key now is get aid into the country, and that means reopening the ports that have been damaged in the fighting—particularly Hudaydah—and making arrangements that will allow the charities and the non-governmental organisations to get on with their vital work. The hon. Gentleman is right that the country is on the brink of famine, and it is probably beyond that now. There is not enough food, oil or other essentials getting through to the people.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): With the limiting of US arms, even by one sale, as well as this new evidence on cluster munitions coming to light this week, will the Secretary of State outline the circumstances in which the Government would suspend UK arms exports to Saudi Arabia and call for an independent UN-led investigation into potential breaches of international humanitarian law?

Sir Michael Fallon: If we had evidence that international humanitarian law had been breached, that, of course, would be a serious factor in considering whether to agree to future licences or to suspend existing licences. If we felt that the Saudi authorities were not properly able to investigate allegations of this kind, we would also, of course, support the call there has already been for an independent inquiry, but the events of the last few weeks and months have shown that, thanks to our
[Sir Michael Fallon]

pressure, the Saudis have been able to investigate these allegations, and they have today, as a result, made the announcement that they have.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Given our very strong diplomatic relationship with Saudi Arabia, and given its saying that it will no longer use cluster bombs, could it be stressed very strongly to the Saudis that, as a gesture of good faith, the independently verified destruction of the cluster bombs they have would go a long way towards restoring the faith of the international community in what they say?

Sir Michael Fallon: I will make sure that that suggestion is conveyed to the Saudi authorities. As I have said, we have already offered to help them to destroy the BL755 cluster munitions, which are the only ones that we supplied to Saudi Arabia.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for prior sight of it. He was careful to say that the Saudis confirmed that they will not further use BL755 cluster munitions—that is, the British-supplied ones. Do they hold stocks of similar munitions supplied by others, and have they stopped their use as well?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me another opportunity to clarify that the Saudis’ statement does relate to BL755 cluster munitions—the only ones that we sold them, which have been at the centre of these allegations. I am not able to comment on whether they hold stocks of other cluster munitions. Perhaps he would allow me to write to him on that.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend think that if the UK had ended arms exports to Saudi Arabia, as some have argued for, thereby weakening, or possibly irretrievably damaging, our relationship with an old friend, the investigation that he is announcing the results of would have been more, or less, likely, and that the UK would have more, or less, influence over events on the ground in Yemen?

Sir Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Had we refused to sell particular arms or munitions to Saudi Arabia, our place would undoubtedly have been taken by some less scrupulous arms supplier who would not have pressed for this kind of investigation. We have had the investigation, we have had the confirmation from the Saudi authorities, and we have now had the result that the coalition will no longer use BL755s.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con) rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Finally, the prize for patience goes to Dr Tania Mathias.

Dr Mathias: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I declare my interest as an Amnesty International member. I welcome the fact that the UK Government will help with the destruction of the stockpile. How many BL755s are in Saudi? Will the Government also help with the clearing of the bomblets—one bomb produces 147 bomblets—from the villages in Yemen?

Sir Michael Fallon: We do not have records going back right through the 1980s of exactly how many cluster munitions were sold to Saudi Arabia. We have offered to help to dispose of any remaining stocks that the Saudis hold. I am not able to offer UK help in a conflict zone to deal with any unexploded ordnance. My best information is that this particular munition did not explode, and that therefore the bomblets, as they are described, are still in the area, but if I am wrong about that, I will write to my hon. Friend.
**Points of Order**

6.23 pm

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The deliberations on the statement we have just had show why it is absolutely vital that we have robust parliamentary scrutiny of UK arms exports. In that light, have you or Mr Speaker received any notification of any Committee attempting to withdraw from the Committees on Arms Export Controls structure, which exists to scrutinise UK arms exports and has done so for many years, formerly as the Quadripartite Committee?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, but I think he knows, as does the House, that it is not a matter that I can address from the Chair. However, he wished to make a point, he has made it, and I am sure that those on whose ears he wished it to fall have heard what he said.

**Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee. As I understand it, that Committee, whose Chairman is sitting on the Government Benches, has withdrawn from the Committees on Arms Export Controls. When we were deciding on our report on Yemen, there was considerable pressure, with visits from Saudi Arabian Ministers. It is right that the House should know that there are pressures going on here. In the past, the Committees on Arms Export Controls were quite strong, revoking 50 licences in the previous Parliament. In this Parliament, their regrouping was delayed by six months. I think that speaks for itself.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** The right hon. Lady knows that that is not a point of order. She wished to raise a point of political interest in the Chamber, but it is not a point of order, and I can say nothing further on it.

**Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope that this is a point of order; it is on a different matter entirely. Today I tried to submit an urgent question on the recall of the Northern Ireland Assembly, which was debating a motion of no confidence in the First Minister. Could the Speaker explain, perhaps at a later time, why the question was not selected, as the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has responsibility for political stability in Northern Ireland, especially at such times of crisis and failure of the Executive?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s point, and this is a matter about which he and other Members may well be concerned, but I absolutely cannot address it from the Chair here in the Chamber. Nor will Mr Speaker give, now or at any time, an explanation as to why he has or has not granted an urgent question. That is not a matter that should be brought up in the Chamber, and not information that can be disclosed from the Chair.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Further to the previous points of order—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Further to the previous almost points of order, I give the right hon. Gentleman the benefit of the doubt that this might be a point of order.

**Dr Lewis:** I think that this one might actually be a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Although the Defence Committee has not withdrawn from the Committees on Arms Export Controls, I am aware of the serious concern that was caused by the leak of a draft report that those Committees had drawn up. Do you agree that it is of absolute importance that if Select Committees, or quadripartite composite Committees like this, are to function, there must be no question of draft reports being leaked for political purposes, as happened in this case?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** That may or may not be a point of order in relation to order in the Chamber, but it is a point about which Mr Speaker will be extremely concerned, and we should all be extremely concerned, because the leaking of reports undermines the work of the Committees who are working hard on them. It is not honourable behaviour becoming of hon. Members of this House to leak reports.

**Chris White** (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will you clarify whether any Committee of this House should be disbanded if there is a leak?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** That is not a point of order. It is not for the Chair to opine on whether a Committee should or should not, in any particular circumstance, be disbanded. However, it is a matter that I am sure hon. Members will address in another forum in another way, and the hon. Gentleman has made his point.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do not want to prolong this discussion, but I wonder whether anything could be done through your or Mr Speaker’s good offices to get together the Chairs of the Committees that make up the Committees on Arms Export Controls to try to get this impasse resolved for the benefit of our constituents, who want robust arms export controls in this House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point. However, although not many things are outwith the competence of Mr Speaker, it is outwith his competence to require any action by the Chairmen of Committees. However, once again, the hon. Gentleman has made his point. I am quite sure that the Chairmen of the relevant Committees will have heard the concerns expressed in the House and will act accordingly.
6.30 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): I beg to move,

That this House has considered exiting the EU and science and research.

I am pleased to introduce today’s debate about science and research, which is one of a number of debates about our exit from the European Union. It is important that we continue to give Members of this House the opportunity to discuss and debate Brexit and the impact it will have on our country.

I would like to say up front that the UK’s science base is not only one of this country’s most impressive national achievements, but one of the strongest in the world. Within the G7, we have the most productive scientific base in terms of papers and citations per unit of GDP. With our world-class universities, four of which are in the world’s top 10, and 18 in the world’s top 100, we have a long-established system that supports and attracts the brightest minds throughout their career and enables them to generate high-quality research. With less than 1% of the global population and just over 3% of global research and development spend, the UK produces almost one fifth of the most highly cited research articles.

The benefits for our economy are very real. The World Economic Forum ranks the UK among the top four nations in the world for university-industry collaboration in R and D, and we ranked third in the global innovation index in 2016.

If hon. Members want a specific example, they might look at the space sector—a high-growth, high-productivity industry that showcases UK research strengths in a global market. Earlier this month at the European Space Agency Council of Ministers, the Government showed their confidence by investing an extra £1.4 billion in ESA, so that we support the world-class science and innovation underpinning this high-growth sector of the economy. Our investment of €170 million in the exploration programme will bring tangible benefits, ensuring, for example, that the ExoMars rover, which is being built in Stevenage is completed and launched.

Thanks to our investments we now lead the research and innovation programmes in ESA for telecoms, Earth observation and navigation, thereby positioning the UK to seize opportunities in those growing markets. I also signed a new memorandum of understanding with ESA to ensure that its European centre for space applications and telecommunications at Harwell, which is a fast-growing space cluster in Oxfordshire, is the focus for the agency’s commercial exploitation of space data.

Those and earlier investments are delivering results. The space sector in this country is growing strongly. It is now worth £13.7 billion a year to the UK economy, employing just under 40,000 people, and we are ambitious for it. We want to increase our share in the global sector to 10% by 2030, creating 100,000 new jobs.

Space is one of a number of success stories that are in part due to Government investments in collaborative structures with international partners in Europe and around the world—a story that we plan to continue writing long after we have left the European Union.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Minister has mentioned collaboration with EU partners and others around the world. I represent a university that has given us Dolly the sheep and, indeed, Higgs boson, so we know that collaboration works, but the only reason that Dolly the sheep and Higgs boson are associated with the University of Edinburgh is that it was able to lead those collaborative projects. We are hearing already that the prospect of leading such collaborative projects is being jeopardised, because of the decision to leave the European Union. Will the Minister do all that he possibly can to ensure that universities such as Edinburgh in my constituency are protected in our exiting the European Union?

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. That is why the Government have, in various announcements, given assurances to UK institutions and institutions across the European Union that we remain full members of the European Union and that we are eligible to lead European bids and to compete successfully in bids for funding streams. We continue to do so and we want institutions such as that which the hon. Gentleman represents in Edinburgh to continue to be as successful as they have been in the past.

This Government recognise that our world-leading science and research must be at the very heart of our industrial strategy, and we are matching rhetoric with resources. At the autumn statement, the Chancellor announced an additional £2 billion a year for R and D by 2021. That is the single biggest uplift in research and innovation spending in decades and it is an opportunity for us to make Britain, in the Prime Minister’s words, the “global go-to place for scientists, innovators and tech investors”.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an important point. Does he agree that that investment and commitment also builds business confidence? This week, AstraZeneca opened a £120 million investment site, which demonstrates its commitment to the UK economy because of the support that he rightly highlights.

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is exactly right. It certainly boosts not only the confidence of our research communities, but that of the business community, which sees that we are putting innovation at the very heart of our industrial strategy. For every pound of public investment in research, we get back more than £7 of net economic confidence. This week, AstraZeneca opened a £120 million investment site, which demonstrates its confidence in the UK economy.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): Although the Chancellor’s announcement that the Government will continue to fund EU projects such as Horizon 2020 was welcome, it is still important to make sure that our universities continue to collaborate. What further measures will the Minister take to ensure that that happens?

Joseph Johnson: Our universities are successful in winning European funding bids. In fact, we have the top four slots of all European institutions, in Oxford,
UK research and innovation nationally and internationally—which will be a strong and unified voice, championing innovation funding body—UK Research and Innovation. We are implementing Sir Paul Nurse’s recommendation that projects should be good value for money and in line with the Government’s commitment to a smooth departure from the EU, the two core inputs are funding and people.

On funding, as I have just said, the Chancellor announced in August that the Treasury will guarantee all successful, competitively bid-for EU research funding that is applied for before the UK leaves the EU. That means that UK participants and their international partners can be confident that they will have the funding necessary throughout the life of their Horizon 2020-funded project. The UK, as hon. Members know, has benefited strongly from Horizon 2020, with more than 5,200 participations and more than €2.6 billion of funding support since 2014. We are top of the table for participations and second only to Germany in funding won.

In addition to underwriting the competitively bid-for research funding, the Chancellor has confirmed that funding will be guaranteed for structural and investment fund projects signed before the UK departs from the EU. We have worked closely with the European Commission to provide swift reassurances. Commissioner Moedas stated immediately after the referendum that “as long as the UK is a member of the European Union, EU law continues to apply and the UK retains all rights and obligations of a Member State.” That helps us to reinforce the message that we still have the same terms of access to European research funding, including Horizon 2020, for as long as we are a member of the EU.

When it comes to people, we recognise the significant contribution to our research base made by non-UK EU nationals. The Prime Minister made it clear again earlier today that during negotiations she wants to protect the status of EU nationals who are already living here. As a global hub for research excellence, we will always welcome the best and the brightest. Others are concerned about EU national students and the rules regarding their contribution to our research base made by non-UK EU nationals. We still have in force. We want that level of economic benefit to continue long after we leave the EU, which is why we are setting up the industrial strategy challenge fund. It will back priority technologies such as robotics and biotechnology where, just as in the space sector, the UK has the potential to turn research strengths into a global, industrial and commercial lead. Although our research and innovation system is world leading, we are working to ensure that it stays that way by being even more effective. That is why we are implementing Sir Paul Nurse’s recommendation that we should establish a single strategic research and innovation funding body—UK Research and Innovation—which will be a strong and unified voice, championing UK research and innovation nationally and internationally.

The EU is, of course, important for the UK’s research base, but it is not the only game in town. The UK was a place of learning before many of the EU’s member states even existed. Some of our universities have been centres of research excellence for nearly a millennium. The UK will, of course, continue to play a leading role in major, non-EU research collaborations that take place here—from CERN in Switzerland, to the European Space Agency. We are a major partner in the new Square Kilometre Array, the world’s largest radio telescope, whose global headquarters will be based at Jodrell Bank. In the LIGO Scientific Collaboration, it was UK researchers, working with their counterparts, who made the dramatic gravitational waves discovery possible.

All that said, it will, of course, not be lost on many hon. Members that there are many valuable interactions between UK and EU scientific institutions. We work closely with our European neighbours on issues that affect our planet as well as everyone on it.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Chancellor has promised to guarantee projects that win funds from Horizon 2020 before we leave the EU. He has set two further tests for those guarantees, namely that projects should be good value for money and in line with domestic strategic priorities. However, when researchers apply for Horizon 2020 funds, it is not clear how they will know whether their projects are “good value for money” and in line with the Government’s strategic priorities. Will the Minister please explain, for the benefit not just of the House but of academics, what they are supposed to do to meet the Chancellor’s criteria?

Joseph Johnson: The Chancellor’s statement of 13 August was an extremely important one, and it did a great deal to help to put aside the uncertainty of the science and research community about its ability to participate in competitively won funding streams. The Treasury has made it clear that it will be good for, guaranteeing payments that fall due to UK institutions after the moment of Brexit. That has significantly helped to reassure our scientists and researchers that they can confidently bid for funding streams in the months ahead.

It is not in our interests to turn away from our long-standing partnerships. That message was reinforced by the Prime Minister when she stated that the Government are committed to a positive outcome for UK science as we exit the European Union. Our priorities in that respect can be broken down into two core issues: continuity in international research collaboration and maintenance of the factors that make the UK the location of choice for some of the best minds on the planet. With regard to a smooth departure from the EU, the two core inputs into those issues are funding and people.

In addition to underwriting the competitively bid-for research funding, the Chancellor has confirmed that funding will be guaranteed for structural and investment fund projects signed before the UK departs from the EU. We have worked closely with the European Commission to provide swift reassurances. Commissioner Moedas stated immediately after the referendum that “as long as the UK is a member of the European Union, EU law continues to apply and the UK retains all rights and obligations of a Member State.” That helps us to reinforce the message that we still have the same terms of access to European research funding, including Horizon 2020, for as long as we are a member of the EU.

When it comes to people, we recognise the significant contribution to our research base made by non-UK EU nationals. The Prime Minister made it clear again earlier today that during negotiations she wants to protect the status of EU nationals who are already living here. As a global hub for research excellence, we will always welcome the best and the brightest. Others are concerned about EU national students and the rules regarding their student loans from the Student Loans Company, and I reassure the House that those rules are unchanged and remain in force.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): The Minister is giving an eloquent description of our current situation, but I am thinking post Brexit. The key question is this: do the Government intend to seek associate country status for Horizon 2020? That would give us some continuity.

Joseph Johnson: These are important questions, which, my hon. Friend will understand, will form a significant part of the overall discussions around our future relations with the EU. We recognise the benefits of collaboration with European partners, and we will seek to ensure that we can continue to derive strong collaboration arrangements all around the world.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): My hon. Friend has been a strong advocate for our university sector since he took up his post. One of the key concerns of my university, and of others across the country—he probably knows what I am about to say—is in relation to international student numbers. Given the opportunities available to us in a post-Brexit world, we have to be better at communicating what immigration looks like in our country.
[Ben Howlett]

For me, and probably for most universities across the country, it is important that we split up our international student numbers from our overall immigration figures. That has the support of 70% of the public. I hope that my hon. Friend will agree on that point.

Joseph Johnson: Whenever I get the chance, I reiterate that we welcome international students and value the contribution that they make to our universities and our economy. I am pleased to be able to repeat that there is no cap on the number of international students who can come and study here, and there is no plan to introduce one.

It is important that we make it clear that EU students continue to be able to access our loan book and come here to study on home fee status, just as domestic UK students do. The Government have been very quick to make that clear to students applying in 2016-17 and to those who will be applying in 2017-18. We will decide the policy for the 2018-19 academic year in plenty of time for the start of that application process.

Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): May I come back to the point raised by the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), the Chair of the Select Committee on Education? Non-EU nationals may be more reluctant than they were to come to this country for as long as our international relationships with the rest of the EU remain unclear.

Joseph Johnson: As I have said, we want to encourage international students to come to the UK. They bring enormous benefits to our universities and to our economy, and we have no plans to introduce a cap. We have a great higher education system, and the fact that we attract the second-largest group of international students of any country testifies to the quality of our institutions. That will continue after Brexit.

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Will my hon. Friend tell us how much it costs to fund the loans to which EU students are entitled—unlike non-EU students, who pay the full fee and help to subsidise the rest of us—given that only 16% are repaying their loans at present? Should that cost not be taken into account when we talk about the costs and benefits of university education in this country?

Joseph Johnson: Of course, we weigh up the costs of enabling EU students to access our loan book—a right that they have for as long as we are a member state of the European Union—and additional costs after the moment of Brexit will be taken into account as we put in place arrangements for EU students for the longer term. For the time being, while we are still members of the European Union, they have a right to come here and access higher education, as home fee students do, and to access our student loan book.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am pleased to hear what the Minister has to say about students in the UK. Has he had any indication from his interlocutors in the rest of Europe about the status of the increasing number of British school leavers who wish to study in European countries, and the relatively favourable fees that they are expected to pay?
The Conservatives cannot call themselves the party of business while actively working to undermine our science and technology sectors. The Prime Minister’s astounding refusal to reassure European Union nationals living in this country that they will continue to be able to do so and the Home Secretary’s reported plans to halve student visa numbers highlight their failure to recognise the potency of British scientific research in the wider British economy. We are entering a fourth industrial revolution and technological advancement is central to the way in which we work, but the Government are seeking to curtail our access to the brightest and best in science, as well as curtailing opportunities for our own citizens to work and study abroad.

The Conservations’ current policy is more about short-term political point scoring than their now forgotten long-term economic plan. We do not hear so much about that now, do we? Indeed, as the vice-chancellor of one of our leading universities recently said about student visas, “politics is trumping economics”. Of course, the Tories have form in this area. Under the last Tory Government, science spending was squeezed. Indeed, the Save British Science campaign was launched in 1986 in response to the then Thatcher Government’s woeful record on science and research. However, between 1997 and 2007, Labour more than doubled the science budget, from £1.3 billion to £3.4 billion, reaching almost £4 billion by 2010. The Save British Science campaign had to be renamed the Campaign for Science and Engineering, because British science had been saved by Labour.

The boost to the R and D budget in the autumn statement has been widely welcomed, but we must set it against the backdrop of six years of subsistence spending. Not only are we now the lowest funder of science of any G8 country, but our spending as a proportion of GDP has fallen to its lowest point in 20 years. The increases in forecast expenditure also assume that all other spending commitments for science and research will remain in place, safe from sweeping Conservative cuts. Given the party’s previous actions, I believe we should remember the motto of the world’s oldest scientific institute, the Royal Society: “Take nobody’s word for it.”

I began by saying how important science and research are to our economy, and that is why today’s debate is so critical. Science provides the inventions and the infrastructure that propel our industry forward. It uncovers the challenges that we face today and provides our industries with a vision for the future. We in the Labour party recognise that in order to have an industrial strategy that works for each and every member of our society, a thriving science community is key. I asked the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy last week whether he would give the UK economy the Christmas present it deserves: an industrial strategy. Sadly, it seems that Santa’s elves are nowhere near ready on this one.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), the shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, has said, we believe that an industrial strategy should be mission orientated. When it is mission orientated, one of the roles of public spending is to lay down the foundations for new opportunities, which then galvanise businesses—the private sector—to invest. Mariana Mazzucato, the world’s leading economist on mission orientated innovation, has shown

in the European Union. The Minister mentioned Horizon 2020, and £1 in every £6 spent on science by the European Union is spent in the United Kingdom. I know from my own constituency that scientists benefit not only from EU funding, but from the highly skilled researchers and scientists it brings with it.

Newcastle University employs nearly 600 staff from various European Union countries. European Union funding allows it to retain and attract talented researchers through prestigious European Research Council grants. For example, there are the Marie Skłodowska-Curie individual fellows, 50 of whom are hosted by Newcastle University, which equates to £11 million in research funding. Some of Newcastle’s leading research centres would not be possible without European Union staff. For example, in the John Walton muscular dystrophy research centre team, which is pioneering treatments for children with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, more than 30% of staff are European and three of its four lead academics are from the European Union. Many right hon. and hon. Members will have similar examples in their constituencies.

Leaving the European Union presents our science and research sectors with numerous challenges in relation to processes, timing, funds, skills, creativity and resources, and the Government have a duty to address those challenges. However, as highlighted in the Science and Technology Committee’s most recent report, the Government’s communication of its Brexit and science strategy—the Minister’s speech notwithstanding—has been woefully insufficient. Why is science not at the heart of the Government’s Brexit strategy when it is at the heart of our economy?

The Government say they will match the funding until the Horizon 2020 programme expires, but that suggests they are planning to withdraw from the scheme thereafter. The Royal Society has estimated that the programme accounts for 22.2% of global research programmes, which is higher than either China’s or the US’s contributions to global research. Why would we seek to withdraw from such a scheme? We receive significantly more from the EU than we pay in: we received £8.8 billion between 2007 and 2013, as against the £5.4 billion we paid in. We do not want to lose access to the framework programmes, because 13 non-member states currently enjoy associate country status, which gives them full access to Horizon 2020 funding and the same status as member states.

The benefits of involvement in European Union programmes are not confined to funding. Contrary to the picture painted by many in the leave campaign, EU science and technology institutions actually reduce bureaucracy and streamline administration processes. For example, they prevent the same work from being done in different labs, they spread good practice within the European scientific community and they harmonise clinical trial regulations. The last is absolutely critical for the diffusion and adoption of innovative new treatments on which many lives depend.

In addition, cross-border and cross-discipline collaboration has benefits for innovation and creativity that cannot be expressed in pounds, shillings and pence—or in euros. If the Government pursue their commitment to ending existing European Union freedom of movement arrangements, these benefits will be jeopardised. In 2014, Switzerland held a referendum blocking free movement for Croatian nationals, and that led directly to their suspension from Horizon 2020.
how business investment should not be assumed, but created via ambitious public investment policies. However, no matter how excited businesses may get, they will invest only when there is a potential market.

Government can help to create new markets and enlarge existing ones through procurement and, critically, trade agreements. The European Union is possibly the most successful trade agreement in history. It has benefited British companies for decades. Forty-four per cent of UK goods and services went to the European Union in 2015.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): The hon. Lady said that the European Union was the most successful trade agreement in history. That was certainly true for a generation or so, but does it not worry her that it is now the slowest growing economic bloc in the world and that that 44% has fallen more than 10 points over the last few years and continues to fall?

Chi Onwurah: I am glad the hon. Gentleman agrees with me that the European Union was the most successful trade agreement in history. He makes a point about the economic growth of the European Union, but it is still one of the largest and most successful economies in the world. It is still a huge market for our goods and services and has some of the richest people in the world. Although economic growth may have been slow over the last few years, I hope he agrees that, as one of the biggest trading blocs in the world, it still represents a huge opportunity. We should obviously be looking outside the European Union for trade opportunities, but we need to be trading with the European Union. There are a lot of people who buy a lot of our goods who need to continue to buy them.

It is clear that a hard Brexit would significantly reduce the size of that market for British companies. On top of that, Brexit will reduce European Union-financed research and development investments. That means that an existing problem in this country—low private sector investment in research—may get worse because the market for goods will be smaller. Given the Government’s claim to be focused on reducing public debt—although, as we know, it has gone up hugely under this Government—it is ironic that, by reducing private investment, public investment in research and development will need to take more of the strain. We in the Labour party believe in public investment, but it should not make up for a lack of private sector investment. We have committed to raise the total investment in research and development in science to 3% of GDP, but we expect the private sector to do its bit.

I urge the Minister to try to get this right for British science. If not, once again the next Labour Government will have to make up for the economic, scientific and social mess that a Tory Government have left behind. The history of these isles speaks of a people who have a verve for technological and scientific endeavour. All we ask is that the Government provide the conditions for continued investigation and inquiry. We cannot have an economy that relies on cheap and insecure labour. A high-tech, knowledge-intensive economy must be Britain’s future. This Government and the people of Britain cannot afford to suffocate our sciences in the smoke of Brexit.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Thank you for calling me so early in this important debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I also thank the Government for putting aside Government time to discuss this important issue and for agreeing to tag the recent report by the Select Committee on Science and Technology, “Leaving the EU: implications and opportunities for science and research”? I am very appreciative.

Before I turn to the report and its obvious relevance to this debate, as this is the first opportunity I have had to address the House since my election as Chair of the Science and Technology Committee may I place on record my gratitude to the House for electing as Chair of the Science and Technology Committee my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), for her stewardship of the Committee over the last 15 or so months. She moved quickly to launch the inquiry back in June, and I am sure the report’s findings will inform today’s debate. I also pay tribute to the interim Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias), who stepped into the breach prior to my election. I am very grateful to her as well. I also thank the Clerks and the staff of the Committee for all their support and guidance in these first few months. Finally in the thank yous, I would like to thank the more than 270 individuals and organisations who took time to provide written evidence in response to the Committee’s call for evidence in the preparation of the report.

I had hoped to talk a little about Brexit itself, but because time is short and there is a great deal of interest in this debate, I will leave that for another time, except to say that Brexit was not about science, which was one of the casualties, along with many other sectors that got caught up in a much bigger argument.

As we have heard, our report identifies five key themes in the concerns of the science and research community; all of which I expect will feature in hon. Members’ contributions this evening—indeed, they already have.

They are: funding; people; collaboration, leadership and influence; regulation; and facilities. I will talk properly about funding and people, but as for collaboration, leadership and influence, it is of paramount importance that UK researchers continue to be part of multinational projects and continue to influence the EU’s research agenda. On regulations, it is important that those which facilitate research collaboration and EU market access are retained while others that hinder innovation are revised. As for facilities, we will have to work hard to ensure ongoing access to the multinational research facilities hosted in other countries and to protect those based in the UK.

Our report outlines some of the opportunities arising from Brexit that should be maximised, such as the opportunity to embed science and technology at the heart of the Government’s industrial opportunity; the opportunity to look at genetic modification regulation, and to improve on the EU’s overly cautious approach; and the opportunity to revise VAT rules to stimulate university and business collaboration. However, above all the Government need to set out a truly ambitious vision for science in the context of Brexit, to send the message around the world that Britain’s position as a science superpower will continue to grow. They are starting to do that, but merely being
open for business is not enough if we do not have any customers. The Government must think beyond the “open for business” model.

As time is short, I will concentrate on the two main issues: people and funding. My Committee agreed to highlight people as a significant theme. We called on the Government to make an immediate commitment to exempt EU citizen scientists and researchers already working in the UK from wider potential immigration controls. Telling EU scientists and researchers who are already working in the UK that they are allowed to stay is one way in which the Government can reduce uncertainty. I have heard many warm words from the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, from the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), and from the Prime Minister. Taking that extra step to provide reassurance for the 40,000 people to whom that applies is not a particularly big ask. Along with the risk of brain drain, the risk is that the UK will become a less attractive place for EU scientists to live, work and study.

On funding, when our report was published, I said that the autumn statement would be a chance for the Government to demonstrate their commitment to science and research in the context of Brexit, so hon. Members can imagine how delighted I was when the Chancellor responded by increasing Government investment in research and development to the tune of £2 billion a year by 2020. That is a huge step in the right direction, and a step towards meeting that 3% of GDP commitment to which all hon. Members want to sign up.

Our report noted that the Government had provided welcome and helpful short-term reassurances for the science community following the referendum, including underwriting EU funding for research and maintaining access to student loans. It is clear that the Government have done the right thing in the short term but my Committee is worried that there is no comprehensive communication strategy for those messages of reassurance. The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation has said all the right things, but I worry that not everyone has heard him. That was brought home to me this week when I met the interim chief executive of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, who said that she attended a meeting at which someone said they had not heard about those reassurances. There is more to be done. The message is good, but do the Government know whether it is being received? The Government clearly cannot do all the communication, but they can have a strategy for providing reassurance, a clear idea of who their message needs to reach, and an idea of who is best placed to reach those people. The recommendation from my Committee is simple. The Government have taken some very helpful first steps, but they need a clear strategy for getting that message out to everyone who needs to hear it.

As we have heard, another key concern is that science and research is not at the heart of DExEU thinking. That was highlighted to the Committee during the inquiry by the fact that a chief scientific adviser is yet to be appointed to DExEU. I hope the Minister addresses that in his closing remarks.

The Government will respond to our report in due course, but I hope its themes give hon. Members an overview of the big issues for science and research. Science and research is the jewel in the UK crown, and needs to be front and centre of the Government’s thinking. If we get this right, we can go from strength to strength and support major life science industries here in the UK, but if the needs of science are forgotten, our position as a science leader will diminish. Science is not a zero-sum game. We can create a Brexit that is both a win for UK science and a win for EU science, but that comes with a warning. Getting it wrong will not only damage the UK, but hold back the cause of science, along with our understanding of the world and our ability to exercise appropriate stewardship of it, and our capacity to make it a better place to live.

I apologise in advance for my conclusion. It is the season of good will and Christmas is coming. The Chancellor has given us some gold. We now need some frankness, some sense, and a sustainable, sensible and suitable immigration policy.

7.15 pm

Carrol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I will not attempt to follow that. My goose would be roasted.

I declare an interest as both a scientist and an EU national—I hold an Irish passport. As such, I feel strongly about what is happening during the debate. Brexit makes no sense for many of us, but it goes against all normal rules for the scientific community and threatens a key activity that is central to their work. Scientists do not see a person’s nationality, class or ethnicity. They see only a mind and a personality. If that mind is brilliant, and if that person has a contribution to make and a part to play, they are part of the community.

We have heard arguments describing the importance of science and its impact on our economy. We have heard about the importance of continued or enhanced funding for science, and we know how important international collaborations are for science excellence. The Minister spoke of the importance of the space sector, but the UK’s continued participation in projects such as the Galileo programme is under serious threat. Galileo is the EU’s answer to the US-based global positioning system—Galileo is needed because the US can block GPS access in times of conflict, and Europe needs an independent system it can rely on. The UK could now be frozen out of both systems, which is a dangerous possibility.

The single most important element in ensuring that we continue to maintain the UK’s position as a science superpower is protecting and valuing the people who make UK science so impressive. I was delighted to welcome to Parliament a fortnight ago Professor Anton Muscatelli, the principal of Glasgow University. He provided us with some interesting statistics. He told us that 20% of the teaching staff and 50% of the research staff at Glasgow were EU nationals. There are two different types of staff. We have the typically young 20-something postgraduate or post-doctoral researcher, who is less likely to have family ties that would make it difficult for some to leave and go elsewhere. They are a highly mobile group of people who have chosen the institution because of its speciality. However, by the nature of science, many other institutions in Europe will have expertise in similar areas.

The next group of staff is more established—they would hold senior research or lecturer positions, and would be in charge of large projects or teams. They may
well have family ties that make it difficult for them to leave. Both groups have doubts over their futures. The UK Government might well say that nothing will change for them in the short term, but I keep hearing about the requirement for other EU states to offer reciprocal arrangements for UK citizens.

These scientists are some of the very best minds in the world. They are the very people enabling the UK to maintain its position at the forefront of world science. They contribute to the UK economy—in Scotland we know our world-class academic sector of 19 universities creates an annual economic impact of £7.2 billion. Those people are being compared to non-economically active pensioners living in Spain. How insulting is that to those top scientists—to be used as bargaining chips in negotiations on rights to remain? Which of us would hang about where we are not wanted? My own husband, an engineer, is an EU national. His 17 years of service in the UK armed forces have been reduced to details of his place of birth.

Thankfully, in Scotland the First Minister has made robust statements on the importance of our EU nationals, and has thanked them for choosing to make Scotland their home. But we need similarly strong leadership on this from the UK Government. We need the assurances called for in the recent report on leaving the EU by the Science and Technology Committee. That report’s recommendations, which have already been highlighted, include an immediate commitment to exempt EU researchers already working here from any wider potential immigration controls. But we need to go further. We should be looking to exempt any researcher with the required skills, whether or not they are already resident in the UK. If we do not offer such assurances, plenty of countries are ready to snap those scientists up.

I move on now to the subject of EU students. There is the potential for a serious impact on the higher education sector if we are not clear about their immigration and fees status post Brexit. Again, that represents a potential lost funding stream. In its submission to the Science and Technology Committee the University of Liverpool stated that if it had no new EU students coming to study, by 2018-19 its loss of fee income would be £6.2 million. In Scotland, EU students contribute massively to the local economy and increase the diversity and improve the student experience for all involved in higher education. Indeed, the financial loss is only one aspect, and we need to consider how we will protect the talent streams that come from the EU. In the UK we cannot currently fill our science, technology, engineering and maths courses with UK students. The EU students who come to study in our institutions provide future talent in areas of key shortages.

I therefore ask the Minister the following questions. What student recruitment strategies are being considered in key STEM areas, at home and abroad? What fee structures will be in place post Brexit—an attractive UK university will quickly become less attractive if EU students are asked to pay international student fees? Visa restrictions already pose major hurdles for non-EU scientists hoping to come to the UK for short study visits. What will happen post Brexit when an EU researcher hopes to collaborate with a UK group? We keep hearing that Brexit means Brexit, but does Brexit really mean that the UK’s international reputation for science should be threatened?

Leaving the EU presents major challenges for the future of UK science, but there is no science representative in the Brexit negotiations. Science must have a voice in any negotiations. The clock is ticking. We need action now to prevent fundamental and lasting damage. It is said that Albert Einstein said, “Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I’m not sure about the universe”. The Government need not be infinitely stupid as they gamble with this most important area of the UK economy.

7.24 pm

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), with whom I agree on some aspects, in particular the importance of giving assurances to EU nationals in this country, whether scientists or not, that they can stay.

What the Minister and the shadow Minister have said about our universities is, if anything, an understatement. Our universities are every bit as good as has been said, and more. I would argue that they are too modest. They underestimate how attractive they are and will be as collaborators to universities not merely in the EU but throughout the world. They underestimate their ability to persuade their own Government of the importance of funding research, given that they have been successful in persuading EU institutions to fund that research. Given their success in attracting students from outside the EU, our universities also underestimate how successful they will be at continuing to attract students from within the EU once we are no longer a member. The universities have been too modest and too afraid of change. They should look forward positively to the opportunities that will open up when we are no longer in the EU.

Three issues have been raised. The first is money. The claim is that 10% of publicly funded UK research and development comes from the EU. That is a grossly misleading figure. During the referendum campaign there was much debate about the use of gross figures for our contribution to the EU rather than net ones. For instance, the gross figure of £350 million a week on the side of the leave bus was criticised. I always used the net figure, and we now know from the Office for Budget Responsibility that the net amount we will get back when we are no longer members of the EU will be £250 million a week. But anyone who criticised the £350 million figure should be equally critical of those who quote the gross receipts from the EU without netting off our contributions to it—the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) mentioned those contributions. With the Horizon programme, we should not be talking about the gross figure of £8.8 billion but the net figure of £3.4 billion over the period 2007 to 2013, which was of the order of half a billion a year. I will come back to that quite significant figure.

Overall, we are net contributors to the EU to the tune of more than £13 billion a year—again, that is from the OBR figures. It should therefore not be too difficult for our universities to argue for the continuation of the money they currently receive from the EU directly from the Treasury, instead of indirectly via the EU, because

[Carol Monaghan]

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2013, which was of the order of half a billion a year. I
the Treasury will be £13 billion better off after meeting all the commitments currently funded from EU funds.

I come now to collaboration. It is obviously important that we continue to provide opportunities for UK researchers to collaborate with high-calibre researchers not just in the EU but across the world. Our universities and researchers are of such high calibre that they will be in demand as partners and should be given opportunities to work with partners from across the world.

If there are barriers to collaboration with researchers in North America, Asia, Australasia and Latin America, I would like to know about them. I constantly hear of and meet researchers from those countries in the UK. If we look out the figures, it turns out that alongside the 32,000 EU citizens working as academics in the UK we have 21,000 from non-EU countries. There does not seem to be too much difficulty in getting researchers and academics from outside the EU. If there are such problems, why have I never been lobbied by the universities to overcome the problems of bringing in citizens from non-EU countries? Do they not like Americans, Latin Americans and Asians? Do they prefer Europeans?

Should we not be seeking opportunities worldwide, and not narrowly in the EU?

Carol Monaghan: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Lilley: I am afraid it has been hinted that I should make progress rather than take interventions.

If there are such difficulties, let us overcome them and make sure they do not apply to EU academics in future.

On student numbers, Universities UK talks about increased barriers to recruiting EU students. I understand there are some 115,000 EU students in the UK. They are entitled to loans from the British taxpayer, and to the right to stay and work after they cease studying. By contrast, our universities are spectacularly more successful in recruiting students from outside the EU, even though those students pay the full cost of their education and effectively help to subsidise all the other students, British and European, at university. Their rights to remain and work in the UK are more restricted. When we introduced full fees for foreign university students, the universities claimed that that would make it impossible for them to recruit from abroad. Happily, they were wrong—spectacularly wrong. I have no doubt that they will be equally wrong about their ability to continue to recruit EU students once we are no longer a member of the EU. The EU countries are closer and richer than many of the countries from which we recruit students who pay full fees.

When assessing the costs and benefits, we ought to take into account the cost to this country at present of giving loans to EU students, which are, inevitably, much more difficult to get back when they have left. Indeed, the official figures show that only 16% of EU students are currently repaying the loans they have received from the British taxpayer. I do not know what the figures are, but I will venture some so that people can knock them down and come back with better ones.

Supposing that 60% of the students—Would the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) like to intervene if he has a funny point to make? No, we do not have any facts or figures; I am trying to elicit them. There are 115,000 students. I do not know how many of them have loans. Let us say that 60% take out loans. If only 16% repay them, that means it would cost the British taxpayer £500 million a year to subsidise EU students. I hope that the Minister or Opposition Members can tell us the sum is less than that, but perhaps they are not interested. Perhaps they like dishing out British taxpayers’ money without calculating how much is at stake and for whom.

Universities are also rightly worried about whether immigration controls will impinge on our ability to recruit students from the EU. They have reiterated their demand that student numbers be excluded from the immigration figures. That is a somewhat disingenuous request—it is not what they really want. If students return to their home country after they have studied here, their net contribution to the net immigration figure is zero. What universities mean, therefore, is not that they want the figures excluded, but that the limitations on students’ right to remain be lifted. They want to, as it were, sell university places by offering the added benefit of being able to get around our immigration controls. They want that in the present for those coming from outside the EU, and they want to maintain it in future for those coming from the EU when we are no longer a member.

That is not the right way to approach the issue. We should, of course, have immigration rules that allow us to recruit students from abroad but ensure that they return later, and that allow us to recruit academics from abroad, as we do at present, without creating added difficulties. If we have sensible and affordable policies to continue our funding and to recruit from abroad, which we ought to be able to do, and we do not impose any new restrictions on recruiting academics, the opportunities for British universities will be far greater than they imagine. I urge them to put their excessive modesty behind them, set aside their fear of change and embrace the opportunities that Brexit will give them.

7.35 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me and giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech today. It is a privilege and an honour to be standing here as the elected representative of Richmond Park, which brings with it a great responsibility that I shall use my best endeavours to fulfil.

I wish to pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr Zac Goldsmith, and thank him for his excellent constituency work on behalf of my fellow residents of Richmond Park over the past six years. In particular, we owe him our unending thanks for his efforts to block plans to build a third runway at Heathrow. The fact that he felt he could no longer be a part of a Conservative party that approved expansion demonstrates beyond all question his passion and commitment to the cause. It is a cause that I take up willingly on behalf of constituents who know that the claimed economic benefits of expansion will not compensate for the impacts of the increased noise and air pollution that millions will suffer if expansion goes ahead. I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of his predecessor, my fellow Liberal Democrat Susan Kramer, who fought the third runway for so many years. I look forward to working with parliamentary colleagues from all parties as we continue to make the case against expansion.
It is a particular honour to be elected to represent Richmond Park, not just because it is my home and the place where I have been bringing up my family, but because of its great history and wonderful environment. Richmond takes its name from the Earl of Richmond, later Henry VII, who built his great palace in what was then called Sheen in 1500. Henry VII was the king who, having won a great victory against an unpopular king at the battle of Bosworth, came to power at a time when the country was catastrophically divided by the Wars of the Roses and urgently needed leadership to bring it back to harmony and prosperity.

Britain today is a divided country, split asunder by the decision taken in June this year to leave the European Union, and it is hard at this moment to see how these divisions can be healed. It is my belief that Parliament can be a positive force in bringing together the two sides of the Brexit debate. If the arguments can be aired openly, questions answered thoughtfully and votes taken on all the significant points of difference, then each British citizen will see that their point of view is being represented, whichever way they voted in June. There can be no question of people being silenced or sneered at for their opinion on Britain’s future within the European Union.

I make no secret of the fact that my own opinion is that we should remain. I believe that the will of the people is the same today as it has always been: to live in a prosperous and stable society. Our responsibilities as parliamentarians are the same as they have always been: to act in the best interests of our country. We have a duty to future generations to bequeath them a society in which they can thrive. Evidence and instinct both suggest that collaboration with our nearest neighbours benefit our trade, our education, our environment, our security and our individual wellbeing. Such benefits should not be carelessly thrown aside without a careful, sober and detailed examination of what the consequences will be.

The impact of Brexit will be wide ranging and not just financial. In my constituency, our hospital relies on the hard work and dedication of migrants from Europe. Many of my constituents work in financial services, which rely on our privileged position inside Europe. Many of my constituents work in financial services, which rely on our privileged position inside Europe. Many of my constituents work in financial services, which rely on our privileged position inside Europe.

In the area of science and research, there is no doubt that the UK has benefited hugely from its membership of the European Union. I had the enormous privilege, before being elected as MP, to work for a world-renowned science and research organisation, so I have had some experience of the discussions and concerns that the prospect of Brexit has raised among the science community. The obvious impact will be the lack of access to research funding provided by the EU. There is no question but that the UK is currently a net beneficiary of this: between 2007 and 2013, we paid in €5 billion to the Horizon 2020 fund and received €8 billion back in grant funding.

But the impacts go deeper. One of the biggest concerns is that by being shut out of access to EU funding, UK scientists will also be excluded from cross-EU collaborative projects and lose access to specialist laboratory facilities across Europe. This will result in a loss of opportunities for UK scientists to participate at the very forefront of research. UK laboratories and research facilities currently benefit from the ability of scientists from across the EU to come and work here. If Brexit inhibits the ability of EU nationals to move to the UK, UK-based science and research will suffer. The success of the UK’s science and technology industries will be critical to our future economy, and we should be doing all we can to nurture and promote them.

I did not aspire to be a politician. I did not ever expect to be standing here addressing hon. and right hon. Members as I am today, but I felt compelled by the events of the last few months—not just the referendum result, but the Government response in the aftermath and the divided society that has resulted—to put myself forward.

I wish to close by thanking my fellow MPs from all sides of the House for the warm welcome they have extended to me since my election. Unexpected though my election was, I am enormously excited by the opportunity I have been given and look forward to playing a full part in the business of this House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. We will now apply a limit of seven minutes for Back-Bench speeches.

7.41 pm

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Let me be the first to congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on her maiden speech, particularly on the generous tribute she paid to her predecessor and on the very real knowledge she brings to this debate from her professional background. She clearly feels passionately about this issue and the wider implications, and I look forward to hearing further contributions from her. She referred to the Brexit vote as “deeply divisive”, leaving us as a country divided. I would gently suggest that for some of us it seemed before the vote that we were becoming a divided country. Now that those people who found themselves so many times on the wrong side of the divide have spoken out, the hope is that we might find a way forward that eventually suits everybody.

I am proud to be the representative of the largest student body of any constituency in the country, with the University of Kent, Christ Church University and one of the campuses of the University for the Creative Arts in my constituency, amounting to more than 20,000 students.

In answer to some of the earlier points raised about visas, it seems to me that there is a clear middle way to follow. It is essential that top-quality academics have access to visas to come here, and indeed that those who are already here from the EU should feel completely secure in their jobs. I am with those who have already spoken out on that point, but I see nothing inconsistent in also believing that a sensible immigration policy, which is what the country wants, must include clamping down on abuses of the student route. The fact that we have closed 800 phony colleges is an important part of that.
I especially welcome what the Minister said about accepting Sir Paul Nurse’s recommendations. I am a strong supporter of the need for an industrial strategy. For generations, this country has been at the cutting edge of research only to see it exploited by successful organisations outside this country. We need an industrial strategy and a focused research policy in order to ensure that we get the best response to our very successful university research programmes.

The University of Kent has facilities in Brussels, Paris, Athens and Rome, and calls itself the European university. I am delighted to say that a withdrawal from the structures of the EU should certainly not mean a withdrawal from Europe. There is not time to list the university’s successes in the space world, but just in the past month on the medical side another grant from Horizon 2020 for a research network addressing biometric solutions to the use of mobile devices led to a successful bid for a £2 million grant for the Relate programme designed to step-change how nature underpins human wellbeing.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley), I see nothing to be afraid of in breaking out into the world. The Times league of international universities puts 24 out of the top 25 in the English-speaking world, including five British ones. Intriguingly, the only exception is the formidable ETH Zürich, and Switzerland, like most English-speaking countries, has a structure in which universities are free-standing institutions, which is sadly not really the case in most continental countries, where universities are much closer to the Government Departments.

Although there may be a short-term concern, which we have heard expressed several times by Opposition speakers, that we might somehow lose out on collaborative ventures—even though we are putting in the money to compensate—on account of attitudes from the other side that are not in their best interests, the fact that we have so much excellence will, I firmly believe, win through.

We have another advantage that is particularly relevant to medical research. When we are dealing with America, which has the largest concentration of excellence in the world, we have a massive advantage, because we do not have the third party of the insurance companies constantly creating a drag on research. If patients want to be part of an experimental programme to access an experimental drug, perhaps as their last chance to stay alive, they can sign up for it in a way they cannot in America without permission from their insurance companies. That is why, for example, our first 14 experimental cancer medicine centres are attracting so much interest from American pharmaceutical companies.

I end by saying how very strongly I support the bid from Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Kent to create a group of healthcare centres of excellence, with a view to establishing in the long run a medical school in Kent. We are the largest area in the country without its own medical school. The inspirational leadership of Dr Abdol Tavabie would make sure that the medical school addressed the very buzz words that we keep hearing we need to fix in the NHS. It is no good talking about things such as ending silos, transferring things from secondary to primary care and closer links between social and NHS care, which people have been talking about for 30 years, unless we hardwire them into medical training, together with feedback mechanisms to make sure that people are brought up to date on new skills automatically—they need to be programmed into the lecturers. Those are just some of the ideas that this incredible innovator, programme leader is pushing for in the new medical school.

I am about to run out of time. It is a sad fact that of the thousands of university students, including my own son who is a medical student, who come through our hospitals, relatively few of them stay. That is because areas do not have a medical school of their own backing them up. I end by recommending to the Minister that we do something about that.

7.48 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): The straight banana syndrome, whereby some commentators would blame everything on the European Union whenever anything in the world went wrong, seems to have flapped on its head. I would now call it the Private Frazer syndrome, whereby the moment anyone mentions Brexit, everything is doom and gloom, with forecasts of everything going haywire and wrong. My advice to the Government on science and technology is the same as it is on other issues that run into Brexit—get on with it! It is the uncertainty that causes problems. The article 50 vote should have taken place in July, and if we were too busy with internal elections, we could have had it in September. It should already have been passed. Delay and uncertainty is what industry tells me they do not like and do not wish to see.

Let me advise the Government on what to do when the repeal Act comes—I hope they will listen. Make it simple. Every single piece of EU law should be brought into British law. If the Conservative or any other party wants to change that in the future, they will have plenty of opportunity if it is British law. Every single thing should become British law in one Bill in one swipe. That would help to remove uncertainty, and it would save us a lot of time to concentrate on other matters in the House.

I agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) that science does not see nationality. That is the problem with the European Union when it comes to science and technology, and, indeed, any other specialism: it sees nationality, but it sees nationality within the European Union. I have been involved in bidding for money, and I know that within the EU structures and rules, this or that EU country, this or that body, must be incorporated to provide the full mix, to the exclusion of the rest of the world—the other 170 nations, with all their expertise. That has been a strength on occasion, but it has far more often been a weakness in the EU. We should not see nationality when we are looking at science and research collaboration; we should see where the best expertise is.

I have spoken to many of my constituents, and several thousand have been polled. Something of a consensus is emerging in my area, and I want to share it with the House. The vast majority of people who voted remain feel that reducing immigration is critical to Brexit, while the vast majority of people who voted leave find access to the single market, in whatever form, perfectly acceptable. I think that the consensus is far greater than Members are prepared to admit.

What kind of immigration are we talking about? I do not think that my constituents will complain if Parliament decides that the big universities should accept students,
teaching staff and experts in science and technology from abroad. Indeed, I will go a step further: I should like regional work visas to be introduced. My constituents do not have a strong view on which people Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland allow to work in those countries. They care about what happens in my locality. They care about whether we can stop Mr Ashley of Sports Direct employing 3,200 people from abroad and preventing them—my constituents—from applying for jobs, or reducing wages in adjoining industries. That is what they are bothered about. I think that, when it comes to where we need to be, the solutions are straightforward, although negotiations will always be complex. We need to get on with them.

We should bear in mind what we have missed out on. We were the leaders 30 years ago. We were world leaders in analogue technology, because we had the scientists, but our weakness was always to do with turning that expertise into manufactured products. Then there was the digital era. In digital microphones—indeed, in all forms of digital technology—we were world leaders 30 years ago, but we were wiped out because we were incapable of turning the technology into effective products, and the EU did not assist us in that regard.

We were also world leaders in the energy sector, but, classically, when it comes to science, technology and energy, the EU goes in 10 directions at once because of national pressures, and does not have the necessary coherence. Europe lags behind in energy technology. In the 1980s, we were world leaders in robotics—our academics were the greatest in the development of robotic technology—but neither we nor others in Europe were capable of delivering the jobs that others did. We skipped a generation in terms of application, and that applies to the whole computer industry even more graphically. We did not protect our embryonic industries and companies because we were not allowed to protect them, but now we are.

There is nothing wrong with control and protection when a new sector is emerging. It would be good for us to use our freedom to protect the blockchain technology sector, for instance. The geothermal sector will clearly be the next development in energy: we have that capacity again, and we should use our freedom to protect the sector and allow it to develop. We now have a great opportunity; we have always had the necessary ingenuity. We must allow our universities to retain their partnerships with, for example, German, French and Italian scientists and technologists, but also to have partnerships with countries in the rest of the world. We must use our freedom to protect embryonic industries, so that there will be production, jobs and wealth in this country as well as ingenuity and innovation.

7.55 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on her excellent maiden speech. I look forward to working with her on many matters that affect residents of both our constituencies.

I thank the Government for granting time for this important debate, and I offer very special thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) for his kind words. It was an absolute joy to be interim Chair of the excellent Science and Technology Committee. Having chaired one of its sessions, I can tell the House that although some of its members, like me, voted to remain and others voted to leave, the Committee was unanimous when it came to the report on the EU and the opportunities and risks for science and research, and is unanimous in wanting Brexit to work for the science community and for research. That is why I am especially proud of the report.

The United Kingdom is a science superpower. As the Minister and others have said, we make up less than 1% of the world’s population, but 15.9% of its most frequently cited research articles come from the UK. However, as we said in our report, science is a global and a mobile endeavour. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock pointed out, people were the major factor in the evidence that we heard. The Minister was right to say that the UK should be a go-to place, but, as the report shows, the Campaign for Science and Engineering has said that it is not enough to allow EU scientists and students to be in our country; we must fight for them, to enable our science and research to succeed even more. It is great that there are guarantees for EU students, and I note that the Minister has repeatedly confirmed that they will be available to current students and those who come here in 2017-18 for the duration of their courses, but it must be said that the communication programme is not enough. That needs to be worked on.

We are also glad about the guarantees for Horizon 2020, and applaud the important information that the Minister has said that funding guarantees will not be taken from the science budget, but will be additional to it. After the publication of the report, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), met several of my Twickenham science businessmen and researchers, and I valued that greatly. I know that he noted many of the detailed points that were made to him. I hope he will also note that Horizon 2020 may end, and, as the leader of the Laboratory of the Government Chemist has said, we need to establish our own transitional research projects.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) spoke of concern about some of our EU researchers already leaving the UK. The Committee said that we needed proper metrics before, during and after Brexit negotiations. Are we losing people? Are we still heading those research projects? As has already been mentioned, there is a big negative.

The Department for Exiting the European Union needs a chief scientific adviser, because it needs guidance on the metrics and on the regulations. I know that the Minister has received evidence from the British Pharmacological Society. The position in relation to the European Medicines Agency is critical. We were leading on the regulations for clinical trials in pharmacovigilance. We have also received evidence from Twickenham businesses such as Ikon, LGC and Mindsoft about the unitary patent system. The Department needs a chief scientific adviser to address what it is going to do. It has to fight for the students, the scientists and the researchers from the EU, and it has to fight for the funding to maintain those research projects. In this Christmas season we have heard lots of wishes that should be on the Department’s Christmas wish list, but primarily it needs Santa to give it a chief scientific adviser.
8 pm

**Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab):** I am pleased to follow the hon. Members for Twickenham (Dr Mathias), who made an informed speech, and for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), who made an excellent maiden speech.

The importance of science to Britain’s industrial revolution is well known: Newtonian physics, Faraday’s electrical magnetism, Jenner’s vaccination. These scientific advances were not simply great intellectual achievements; they also made a difference to the way of life of everybody in this country and across the entire world, and that is still true today.

The quality of our scientific research is not only valuable in itself; it also underpins our economic performance, standard of living and quality of life. It imbues our values as a civilised country, and it is what distinguishes us from our medieval forebears.

The leading clinical geneticist Professor Sir John Burn of Newcastle University, who was born in west Auckland, undertook research in 1990 testing aspirin across 68 countries and found that regular doses can reduce hereditary cancer risk. I asked him about the value of pan-EU collaboration; he said it makes things more effective, makes it easier to lure the best scientists on to projects and, despite the bureaucratic hurdles, it produces better results.

My constituency hosts a Glaxo plant. Sir Andrew Witty, the chief executive officer, tells me that the innovative medicines initiative, part of Horizon 2020, facilitates pre-competitive research into questions such as liver toxicity, which is far more economic to tackle at the EU level than it could ever be for an individual country. Currently, Glaxo does 30% of its R and D in the UK; it would be costly to move it, but in a worst case scenario that could happen.

Members have already spoken about the financial benefits to us of joining in the EU programme. A key aspect is that we are at the heart of shaping the research. The European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures is currently chaired by a British academic, as is the European Research Area Board. We also host EU facilities and headquarters. Does the Minister think that if we became merely an associated country, or a non-associated third country, we would still be leading the EU direction for this research?

Everyone values Horizon 2020, so I call on the Government to make continued membership of it and its successor programmes a key objective in the negotiating strategy for Brexit. In the Treasury Committee, the Chancellor confirmed he was guaranteeing projects that receive Horizon 2020 money beyond that period, but the Minister was not able to tell us in his opening speech how researchers can know their guarantees meet his criteria will be met by successful Horizon 2020 bidders.

Given that confirmation. It sounds as if the Chancellor is saying his criteria will be met by successful Horizon 2020 bidders.

Colleagues have spoken about the problems that will arise if we lose freedom of movement—at best, discouraging European academics from working here; at worst, preventing people from coming at all. These people make up over 20% of teaching staff in some of the most crucial scientific subjects: physics, astronomy, mathematical sciences, biological sciences, chemistry and material sciences, and computer sciences. We cannot afford to lose them.

I will not repeat what colleagues have said and no doubt will continue to say, but it is vital that Ministers confirm the status of people who are in the country today. Furthermore, the Government should make it clear that they will seek a complete carve out for British and European academics post-Brexit so they can travel and work in each other’s universities.

The Government should commit to a shared post-Brexit regulatory structure so that researchers have a level playing field and minimised costs and can continue to run large population experiments in parallel across European countries. In essence this would be an open market in R and D post-Brexit.

We need to remember that scientific development is essentially a collaborative and co-operative part of human endeavour. It does not recognise national boundaries in the quest for truth. This is not a new idea. Writing to Robert Hooke in 1676, Isaac Newton said:

“What Descartes did was a good step. You have added much...If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

8.6 pm

**David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con):** It is an honour to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), who gave an exceptional maiden speech. Although she is no longer in her place, I wish her well in her future endeavours in this House and in serving her constituents. It took me back to my maiden speech. Although she is no longer in her place, I wish her well in her future endeavours in this House and in serving her constituents. It took me back to my maiden speech; I spoke on the same day as my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). We both talked on science, and I congratulate her on the great work she has done since in helping to boost skills in that vital area.

I am delighted to speak on this subject. Science is a vital field, especially at this time of significant change and great uncertainty. Brexit is not something that we should fear. The fundamentals of our economy are good. Indeed, forecasts indicate that our growth will be stronger than that of Germany and France again next year. We should look forward with confidence as we navigate our way forward and realise the opportunities that lie ahead.

We must use Brexit as a spur and a call to action in addressing long-standing challenges that have been a drag on our economy for too long, including the skills gap and below-par productivity. Science and technology have a vital role to play here, as I am sure colleagues across the House will agree.
The advanced therapies manufacturing action plan from the Medicines Manufacturing Industry Partnership—both snappy titles—says that, as part of leaving the EU, “it is vital that the UK makes all efforts to retain and continue to improve its fiscal offering in order to secure investments and anchor infrastructure in the UK and give confidence to investors.”

That is why I join the Select Committee on Science and Technology in welcoming the Government’s funding guarantee related to the EU science projects that we have talked about at length in this debate.

I also pay tribute to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, because he gets this: he understands how important it is that we build investor confidence and back innovation-led productivity and infrastructure. I welcome the £2 billion a year he announced in the autumn statement; it will be vital to science and innovation. It is an important step and hugely welcomed.

But this is not just about funding. Colleagues have spoken about the importance of collaboration. It is critical that we maintain relationships with European and other international partners and build our commitment to collaborations, not least of which is a science project that is vital to our area, the square kilometre array project at the Jodrell Bank observatory. This project will result in the creation of the world’s largest radio telescope. We must continue to be ambitious in backing world-leading scientific initiatives; that must be a clear priority.

That is why I welcome the Prime Minister’s demand and ambition for a modern industrial strategy that puts a clear value on science. She was right to say, in a speech in Birmingham during her campaign for the leadership of the Conservative party:

“It is hard to think of an industry of greater strategic importance to Britain than its pharmaceutical industry, and AstraZeneca is one of the jewels in its crown.”

AstraZeneca has a hugely significant presence in Macclesfield. The Prime Minister also gets this. She has learned lessons from Germany and Australia, which are setting out clear industrial strategies. We now need to do the same. We must not seek to pick winners; we must seek to create the conditions that will enable winners to emerge without being picked. There is a fundamental difference. I think we are well placed to do that.

When we consider our industrial strategy, it is clear that science and the life sciences have a role to play, particularly given their huge impact not only on job creation—there are 62,000 jobs in the life sciences—but in productivity per employee, which is critical, with £330,000 of gross value added per employee. That is staggering, and we must get behind this industry and other scientific endeavours to ensure that we realise all the available productivity improvements. It is also critical, as we all know in this House, that we tackle the productivity gaps that have plagued us for too long.

Here are some of the asks that I want to put to Ministers. Will they please continue to take action on the infrastructure that will be vital in underpinning our economic performance, not just on HS2 but on trans-Pennine links to unlock the potential in the north? Will they take action on skills and drive up the quality of apprenticeships? I am pleased that the Department for Education’s post-16 skills plan has an emphasis on health and sciences, as this will be crucial. I also urge Ministers to speed up the adoption of new medical treatments by implementing the accelerated access review. I was delighted to read what the Health Secretary said about this in his recent article in The Daily Telegraph. It will be vital for life sciences and for improving patient outcomes.

We need to see more being done in the north. We talk a lot about the golden triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London, but important clusters are being developed in the north as well, not least in the life sciences corridor in Cheshire that links into the university city of Manchester. That will be key for the northern powerhouse. We will need to expand the network of catapult centres, and I am delighted that such a centre is being launched in the form of the medicines technology catapult at Alderley Park. We also need to have the anti-microbial resistance centre located there. As we do these things, we will build confidence in business. I have already mentioned AstraZeneca’s investment in Macclesfield, which has been most welcome.

Dr Mathias: Does my hon. Friend agree that some of the EU regulations on phase 1 clinical trials have not been helpful, and that there will be opportunities in that regard in the future?

David Rutley: Absolutely. We need to seize those opportunities and get behind science and the life sciences.

Looking at local examples, we have seen 600 jobs being created in just a couple of years at Alderley Park following AstraZeneca’s decision to relocate to Cambridge. Those jobs are highly important for the north. But this is not just about the life sciences. I have already talked about Jodrell Bank, and I very much hope that Ministers will support my drive to have it nominated as a world heritage site. That will be key in celebrating the science heritage of that site, which will be important for the north and for the visitor economy.

I also welcome the fact that the Government are re-examining their excellent work on research and development tax credits and allowances. This has helped to underline the importance of science and to show that the UK economy is open for business. I am pleased that the Chancellor has indicated that there will be a review of the tax environment to ensure that we can build on the introduction of above-the-line tax credits to make us even more competitive.

I cannot match the Christmas closing lines of the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), but I will echo the words of one of my constituents in one of the great Christmas jingles: it is time for us now to look to the future; it’s only just begun.

8.15 pm

Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I would just say to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) that, had my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) and I known that the Chair of the Committee was going to write the last line of the report, we would not have voted for it in the first place. [Laughter.] None the less, I am delighted to be here this evening to support the Committee and its
report and to discuss this extremely grave and urgent matter in the few minutes that I have. I shall try to be as brief as possible.

I should also like to congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on a very coherent and well delivered maiden speech. I disagree with her on Heathrow, but I agree with her on exiting the European Union. I shall set out my position on that briefly if I may.

I told the then Prime Minister during the statement on 27 June following the referendum that in all my almost 25 years as a Member of this House, when faced with a difficult matter, I have always regarded my primary responsibility to be to the people of Lewisham West and Penge. They voted by roughly 2:1 to remain in the European Union, which is convenient for me because I share that judgment. That is why, the week before last, I voted against the Government amendment to the Opposition day motion on a timetable for article 50. I accept that I was in a substantial minority, and I will probably remain so, but I have told my constituents that I will not vote for anything that could undermine our relationship with the European Union.

My position is that we really should have made more effort to reform the institutions of the EU, but the chance to do that has now gone. I accept what might well happen in the future, but others have written to me to say that my intention is a betrayal of democracy. This will happen in the future, but others have written to me to say that my intention is a betrayal of democracy. This is part, and I will not vote for it. It is no betrayal or denial of democracy, as some have suggested, for Members to represent their constituents to the best of their ability.

The subject of today’s debate is extremely important. The UK is among the international leaders in science and research. I know that some people will say that British is best, almost regardless of what they are talking about. They say that something British is the best in the world even when they have little or no experience of what the rest of the world has to offer. In the fields of science, technology and research, however, there is a clear and strong case to be made that Britain is in a strong position, and widespread concern has been expressed, not least in today’s debate, about the uncertainty into which the British science and technology community has been placed following the decision of 23 June.

I will now provide an indication of just how much things have changed in the intervening six months. When the Science and Technology Committee did a report into EU regulation of life sciences—it would become the first report of the 2016-17 Session—under its previous Chair, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), we took evidence in March and April and received 33 written submissions. In compiling the report that is appended to today’s debate, as the current Chair pointed out, the Committee held two evidence sessions in July and took evidence from Ministers, one of whom is in his place, in October. Given the entirely changed landscape of the science and research background, that inquiry attracted no fewer than 264 written submissions. Many came from the research universities and institutions that have been mentioned today, but many more came from individual academics and researchers who are concerned about the position in which they have been left.

I accept that it will not be easy to provide assurances in the short term. I dissent from something said by one of my hon. Friends earlier about getting on with things and getting them done quickly. I accept the value of clarity in the short term, but I want to ensure that we get this right despite my better judgment—I outlined that earlier. It is better to get it right than to get it soon. If it is possible to do both, all well and good.

All Members, not just those here present, will have received numerous submissions about this evening’s debate from a wide variety of medical charities, universities, and other organisations. I do not have the time to read it out now, but I particularly commend the submission from the Royal Society, which highlights people, networks and collaboration, investment, and regulation as the key areas to address. On providing clarity, the Government could take the smart step of guaranteeing the position of EU nationals in the UK now. They could then go with a strong hand to the negotiations after article 50 has been triggered for equal treatment of British nationals overseas.

In conclusion, the referendum result has raised serious questions about the future of several vital industries and economic activities in the United Kingdom. Financial services may be particularly exposed, but science and research is at least equally significant to the wellbeing of our people. Amid the numerous complexities of designing our future relationship with the European Union, the Government must do all that they can, as soon as they can, to resolve the serious issues facing the entire science and research community.

8.22 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I welcome the fact that this debate is happening in Government time, and I was delighted to support the Back-Bench application for it. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd). I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) in her absence. Had she been here, I would have gently pointed out that Richard III is a rather popular monarch in Leicestershire and has been rather good for our tourist industry.

This debate is important to my constituency, which has Loughborough University at its heart, to my constituents and to our potential life science opportunity zone at Charnwood Campus. It is a shame that the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation is not still in his place, because I had hoped that he might have given us an early Christmas present by announcing life science opportunity zone status for the Charnwood Campus. Perhaps the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will make a note of that, although I do not expect him to make such an announcement this evening. I must also mention the other businesses and organisations in my local area that rely on science and research, including the University of Leicester. The Science Minister recently visited Loughborough, so he will know that, according to the 2014 research excellence framework, 65% of Loughborough’s academic staff are involved in internationally leading research, putting the university...
17th out of 154 higher education institutions. It ranks 10th in England for research intensity and generates in excess of £40 million a year in research grants. That experience is directly relevant to the university’s concerns about EU funding and collaboration.

It is right to recognise the commitment of this Government and previous Governments to science and research funding. I pay tribute to the science Minister—he is now back in his place and if he has not heard from his fellow Minister about my request for an early Christmas present, I suggest he ask now—to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) and to the previous Member for Havant, who now resides in the other place, for fighting the science corner in successive Budgets, autumn statements and spending rounds. The Government are delivering on their manifesto commitment to protect the science capital budget, and the science budget of £4.7 billion will rise in cash terms every year in this Parliament.

It is fair to say that science and research funding was perhaps not at the forefront of the campaigning or in the general hubbub around 23 June. People do not always understand—I certainly did not before becoming the MP for Loughborough and thus for Loughborough University—what Brexit might mean for innovation, jobs and Britain’s place in the world. The Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee was right when he said that how that aspect of Brexit is handled—I am paraphrasing so I hope that I have got this right—goes to heart of whether we remain an outward-facing nation, leading the world in research and cutting edge science and technology, or whether we cede that position to other countries. One local business put it to me like this:

“Being in the EU puts us in a much larger market than UK alone. It helps to attract and employ the best people to compete in fierce international markets. The UK should be seen as modern, open and inclusive to invite further investment.”

Some on the Government Benches will disagree about the terms on which we conclude Brexit, but we can agree, based on figures already cited, that UK research is enormously influential around the world. What was missing from the discussion before 23 June was just how important EU research funding is in supporting the UK’s research and how much that funding is at risk at the moment. It is about not only money, but uniform regulations, which should not be overlooked in future negotiations and agreements.

Advances in research and the consequent benefits to society and the economy could not be realised simply by having the same level of funding go through a UK funding body. Loughborough University tells me that urgent action is required to guarantee UK participation in EU research networks post-Brexit, including continuing to contribute to funding of EU research programmes initiated during the two years after invoking article 50. We will all have anecdotes about research bids in which the UK has been dropped completely as a participant or co-ordinator due to the referendum, but I know of at least one case in which the UK institution was invited back into the project following the Treasury statement in August on underwriting UK participation, which demonstrates how important that announcement was and how important continuing announcements in the same vein will be. I welcome the Chancellor having given that commitment. We have already heard demands that the UK have associated country status in Horizon 2020—third country status would be much less satisfactory.

A non-university example is Medilink East Midlands, which has supported over 1,000 companies in the development of innovations through the European regional development fund project that it ran between 2008 and 2015. It has three new ERDF projects that will continue that support for the next couple of years, and it is worth noting that ERDF has been the only source of funding for business and innovation projects available to them since 2010. Over the past seven years, Medilink EM has delivered an intensive programme of innovation support to the east midlands life sciences sector. In addition to supporting over 1,000 companies, that has meant producing gross value added of over £8.2 million, creating or safeguarding 480 jobs, and helping over 25 new product launches. As we also heard, however, none of this is possible without talking about people, and this is top of the worry list for those most affected by this debate. We have already heard about how much money international students bring—£11 billion to the UK economy each year—but they also make an important cultural contribution. In 2012-13, 5.5% of students studying in the UK were from EU countries, generating £3.7 billion for the UK economy and sustaining 34,000 jobs in local communities. As a local Member of Parliament representing a large university, I can tell the House that those are not always high-value jobs; we are also talking about the cleaners, cooks and administrators who make a university function, leaving aside the other jobs created locally which rely on the university, such as those in retail and leisure. I echo the call of my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) that students should not be taken into account in net migration numbers. I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement at last week’s EU Council meeting that she wants an early deal on the rights of EU citizens, and I shall continue to push Ministers to honour that.

In the short time available, I just wish to say that by 2019 we are going to have new immigration and trading policies, and we look forward to a new industrial strategy, and we must have a new relationship that enables our institutions to take part in EU funding for science and research.

8.29 pm

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The debate about leaving the EU and science is not unique in having myths associated with it, and I wish to talk about two today. The first, which has been mentioned by a number of people, concerns problems with scientific collaboration and financing. As has been well documented and elucidated, this country benefits in its research collaboration and financing. As has been well documented and elucidated, this country benefits in its research budget: we are a net gainer in research. It has also been pointed out that we are a net donor when it comes to overall European funding. What is often not stated is that the UK have associated country status in Horizon 2020—third country status would be much less satisfactory.

Joseph Johnson indicated assent.

Graham Stringer: I see the Minister is nodding. Science is funded through the European development funds and other funding, and when we look at that, we see that we are a net contributor. It should be possible, with human ingenuity, to sort out that funding issue.
Secondly, let me mention collaboration. There is not time to go into this fully, but one of my hon. Friends mentioned 17th century science. Isaac Newton put his theory of gravity together while a plague was going on. He used the work of Johannes Kepler, a German who put his work together by stealing work in Denmark and working on Italian and Polish work while the Thirty years war was going on. Science finds a way to collaborate across all sorts of boundaries.

I want to quote from the Science and Technology Committee’s report that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) referred to, “EU regulation of the life sciences”, which was published about a week before the referendum. It was passed unanimously by the various parties on the Committee, albeit after some debate, and it is worth reading. The myth is that somehow the EU is pro-science and is good for science, but the report states:

“Our predecessor Committee’s inquiries had showed some resistance from the European Commission to evidence-based policy making and science, including the hostility to GM Organisms (along with an arbitrary and unscientific use of the precautionary principle), the dilatory approach to revising the Clinical Trials Directive and the Electromagnetic Field Directive, as well as the sacking of Professor Anne Glover.”

The EU is hardly a body with a good record on science. The sacking of Anne Glover was a disgrace. She was sacked not because she was a poor scientist, but because she was a good scientist giving evidence about GM foods. Greenpeace, quite disgracefully, lobbied against her staying, and the Commission, spineless as ever, sacked her.

The clinical trials directive has already been referred to. Not only was it a bad directive that led to science leaving the EU because it was ineffective, it took too long and it was inconsistently applied—the EU is now proposing new regulations for 2018, which we hope will be more effective—but it has taken 20 years, while science and scientists have been leaving the EU, to put that directive right. The electromagnetic field directive was relatively quickly rectified, as it took the EU only 10 years to put that right. It was hindering work on machines for diagnosing cancers and other diseases using nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy and other instruments.

Then we come to the phthalates. One phthalate was banned, and the EU then banned a series of phthalates. Almost the first lesson that any pupil gets in chemistry is that sodium chloride is essential for life and potassium chloride is a poison. We cannot just say that because one phthalate might poison rats, which was the evidence base the EU was using, all phthalates will poison rats. An over-use of the precautionary principle has meant that directive right. The electromagnetic field directive was relatively quickly rectified, as it took the EU only 10 years to put that right. It was hindering work on machines for diagnosing cancers and other diseases using nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy and other instruments.

Then we come to the phthalates. One phthalate was banned, and the EU then banned a series of phthalates. Almost the first lesson that any pupil gets in chemistry is that sodium chloride is essential for life and potassium chloride is a poison. We cannot just say that because one phthalate might poison rats, which was the evidence base the EU was using, all phthalates will poison rats. An over-use of the precautionary principle has meant that the ban on GM foods has continued, and because of that this country does not have the benefit of a blight-free potato and many other beneficial agricultural products. During the referendum debates, we were told how good the EU was for industry. As I never tired of pointing out, our agro-chemical industry had almost disappeared because of the Commission’s and the EU’s attitude to science.

I will refer to two other non-EU agencies, mentioned in the debate, that show how anti-scientific the EU is. One is the European Space Agency, an excellent organisation that does some very good work indeed. When the Science and Technology Committee visited it in Rome just before the last general election, its senior scientists were desperate to keep the Commission out of their work because they were worried about its anti-scientific attitude. The Galileo project, which is funded primarily by the European Commission and is also used by the European Space Agency, is three times over budget and only halfway through—it will take about three times as long to complete as was expected.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge said that it was better to get things right than not get them right; I think the EU had its chance to get things right, but there was never any reform. Now we are out, we can look after our own science.

8.36 pm

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this debate.

Following June’s historic referendum, I have been working closely with institutions and businesses in my constituency to ensure that, now more than ever, science and technological institutions have the right frameworks to secure as much funding as possible, before and after we leave the EU. I want to put this in context. Plymouth has a global reputation for marine science engineering research, not only through Plymouth University, which is well known for its technology work, but through the Royal Navy, the National Marine Aquarium, the fishing industry, the Marine Biological Association, which was set up in the 1870s to explore whether we could ever over-fish our waters, and Plymouth Marine Laboratory.

Plymouth Marine Laboratory did a great deal of research into CO₂ emissions and global warming. I am not surprised; after all, Captain Robert Falcon Scott was a Plymouth boy. I pay tribute to Stephen de Mora, chief executive of PML, for the work that he and his team have done in preparing me for today’s debate. Both PML and the Marine Biological Association do much for science and technological research—not only in the south-west, but throughout the rest of the country. They have links with South Korea, and together they have done much research into the movement of plankton in and around Antarctica—plankton are a key part of the diet of fish; without them, we would not have all those fish that we like eating.

I was pleased that in his recent autumn statement, the Chancellor announced that the Government are committed to making science and research a lynchpin of our economy after Brexit by taking steps towards increasing science spending, as the Science and Technology Committee had previously urged. I am also pleased that the Government have provided reassurance to the science and research community by promising to maintain the funding that now comes from EU grants beyond the point when the UK leaves the European Union. That is more important than ever: a Government study recently found that for every £1 of public investment in research and development, the private sector invested a further 136% on average—a pretty good return, as far as I am concerned.

I am unashamedly pro-science. Science contributes to economic growth, enabling the development of new goods and services, attracting inward investment and creating jobs. In February, when the former Prime Minister formally announced the referendum date, my local paper, the great Plymouth Herald, ran an article entitled “19 things EU funding has done for Plymouth”.

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In 2020, we will commemorate the Mayflower leaving Plymouth to found the American colonies. Interestingly, the strapline for Plymouth used to be “The Spirit of Discovery”, but then, of course, we did have Sir Francis Drake, and an enormous number of scientists have come from Plymouth. However, an incredible 16 of the 19 projects in that article sit within my constituency, with many involving science and research. In short, the funding is vital for industry and for my constituency, although I recognise that not all EU funding is necessarily generous, and I would encourage the Science and Technology Committee to undertake an inquiry into how the situation could be improved.

Statistics on the EU Horizon 2020 programme, published by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy earlier this month, indicated that the UK ranks first in terms of participation. Previously published statistics showed that UK-based researchers lead far more projects in Horizon 2020 than researchers from any other nation.

As we leave the EU, I would like the British Government to continue to invest in R and D and not only to work with research and science organisations in the EU but to use this opportunity to forge new alliances with our non-European partners in the US, where a significant amount of research and development takes place, and the far east, including South Korea. Although the costs of development in global research may be higher in the short term, I hope that market forces will make sure we bring them down.

One contentious issue, which we have heard about today, is immigration. I quite understand the Government’s position of not wanting to take the student population out of the figures, but it is really important that we make sure the Government are much more proactive in talking about the number of students. I am very aware that they have to do some work on that.

While I welcome the fact that any non-UK EU citizen who has lived in this country continuously for five years will be allowed to remain here, the Government must get the balance right between protecting those researchers who contribute so much to our science and technology, and listening to the very real concerns about immigration that Members of this House heard on the doorstep during the referendum campaign.

The June referendum’s vote to leave the European Union was historic, providing not only uncertainty but huge opportunities for our excellent science and technology sectors. Let us seize this opportunity to show the world that Britain is open for business and ready to lead from the front when it comes to improving the lives of everyone around the world through science and innovation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We are going to chop the speech limit down to six minutes.

8.42 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): This is a very welcome debate, and I congratulate the Government on recognising that Members of the House are worried about how the Prime Minister plans to take Britain out of the EU and about what the fine print of Brexit will be—not least for science and research and for the many interlinked sectors and economies.

The impact on our universities and on their ability to maintain their immense contributions to science and research is one of the many concerning and complex challenges Brexit throws up. The wide role played by our universities cannot be overestimated. Universities are engines for so much in our economy and society. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, they generate an annual output of £73 billion and around £11 billion of export earnings for the UK economy. They create jobs, drive innovation, support growth, and are beacons recognised by the rest of the world for their integrity, quality and innovation.

At a regional and local level, their importance is no less noteworthy. The University of Bradford, in my home town, is an important and central part of the city in many different and positive ways. The university supports local and regional growth, encourages enterprise and business development, attracts investment and talent, and provides and creates employment. Bradford is not unique in that regard. Our universities are dynamic, and they make an invaluable contribution to the UK’s place in the world. Brexit must not be allowed to undo that intentionally or inadvertently. The Government must protect and enhance the way in which British universities bring about positive impacts on behalf of the UK, not least in science and research.

Collaborative working with the EU in this field makes an enormous contribution to Britain. In its report on the challenges of Brexit, MillionPlus, the Association for Modern Universities, stresses that the value of cross-country collaboration between academics in different EU countries cannot be overstated. This collaborative research, and the relationships that stem from it, need to be promoted as part of the negotiations to leave the EU. That is just as important as guaranteeing funding. In 2014-15, UK universities received £836 million in research funding from EU sources—15% of the total value of all research funding that year. MillionPlus says that this often proves more accessible than funding from UK sources.

As many Members will know, the Alzheimer’s Society offers one example of the importance of research and how a bad Brexit may damage Britain. The society points out that Britain is a global leader in dementia research but worries that this position, particularly in relation to funding, could regress as we exit the EU. The Alzheimer’s Society and I are urging the Government to prioritise securing continued access to EU funding schemes and programmes for research as they negotiate a new relationship with the EU post-Brexit. That is one example of how EU collaboration and investment can be critical; there are many others.

Collaborations are vital for science. Scientists should be able to work with the best in their field irrespective of their geographical location and institutional affiliation. Researchers collaborate; they overcome all sorts of institutional and financial difficulties by working together and pooling resources. EU funding has played a part in overcoming the sorts of challenges that researchers face. I am sure that I speak for many universities, and all the organisations who are beneficiaries of the research
they do, when I urge the Government to look seriously at how to make up shortfalls in funding for research that arise from Britain's departure from the EU post-Brexit.

I hope that the Government will commit to making sure that any lost research and innovation funding arising from Brexit is replaced. I also hope that they will reassure our research community and preserve our international reputation by committing to a real-terms increase in science funding. Safeguarding what we have and reassuring those with a vested interest is only the first step. The next phase will be to ensure that in the decades to come the way in which Britain works with the world does not lose sight of the vital and specific needs of our universities and the research they carry out.

The Government will need not just a long-term plan for leaving the EU but a plan for engaging with the rest of the world on many important and fundamental levels.

8.47 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Scientific research is one of the United Kingdom's biggest assets, and we must ensure that Brexit provides us with an opportunity. We are in a position to critique and improve on aspects of EU legislation that hold back our development, to adopt the policies that have benefited us, and to create a Britain that is increasingly outward-looking and pioneering in science and research.

Many sectors claim that their people are their greatest asset, but this is most clear in the area of scientific research and innovation, where individual qualities count for so much, skills need to be developed over a period of years, and there is a great deal of specialisation. The search for and recruitment of talented engineers and scientists is already very challenging, and the potential for a barrier to go up between the UK and the EU is a great concern. I was pleased that the Prime Minister attempted to resolve this problem to enable the 1.3 million British subjects living in the EU to remain there and the 3.3 million EU citizens to remain here, but disappointed that Donald Tusk, playing politics with peoples' lives, rebuffed the proposal.

When discussing migration, especially in the context of Brexit, we have to get the tone and values right. During the referendum campaign, I talked to hundreds of people about what it would mean to leave the EU, and controlling our borders was a significant concern, although not the greatest. I did not meet anyone who thought that we should stop scientists and engineers from coming to and settling in the UK. There is a desire that Britain should control her borders but also enable those with most to contribute to come here. It should be of huge reassurance to members of the scientific community that the British people greatly value their contribution, no matter from where they came.

Our universities sector is world-leading, with three in the top 10 of the Times Higher Education world university rankings. There is only one other European university in the top 10 and it is Swiss. To maintain our global position, it is vital that, post-Brexit, the whole of the UK universities sector not only maintains its attractiveness to EU students, but enables more students to come from countries such as India by removing barriers. Given that students come for a set period of time and for a specific purpose, they should also be taken out of our immigration figures so that the numbers reflect those seeking to remain here.

Although the vote to leave the EU has caused some to raise fears that it will result in our becoming an inward-looking nation, cut off from the world and its opportunities, most prefer to be optimistic. Brexit is an opportunity to ensure that people with the skills and talents that we need come to Britain so that we have an immigration system that works for everyone.

The UK has been a net beneficiary of EU funding for research, benefiting from the collaboration opportunities offered by EU programmes such as Horizon 2020. However, we need to be clear that our overall contributions massively outweighed any financial returns in this particular sector. Some countries receive most of their Horizon 2020 moneys in structural funds to build up their science base, but Britain largely receives money based on excellence. We ought to be clear that scientists from across the EU gain enormously from collaborating with us. We ought not to think that we are in a weak, dependent position, because we are not.

Funding concerns have been raised by the Science and Technology Committee in its seventh report of this Session. I look forward to hearing the Government’s response in the new year. Like many, I was encouraged by their recent announcement that there would be guaranteed funding for participation in Horizon 2020 projects, even if the project finishes after our departure from the EU.

The Prime Minister's announcement of an additional £2 billion a year of funding by 2021 for science and innovation through the new industrial strategy is welcome, but I would like clarification on where that money will be spent. Given that we will no longer be a member of the EU, we will not receive any funding from the successor to Horizon 2020. Is it possible or expected that a proportion of that £2 billion will be used to buy into, in part or in full, the successor to Horizon 2020? According to the European Commission’s rules, Britain can participate in Horizon 2020 outside the EU, just like Tunisia, Norway and Israel.

Brexit offers an opportunity to correct any failings in EU policy for science and research. For example, the EU clinical trials directive, which was approved in 2001 and introduced in 2004, is widely seen as being a failure due to increased costs, delays and differing interpretations across the EU. It is due to be replaced by the clinical trial regulation, which is widely expected to be much better and is currently due to be implemented in October 2018. That demonstrates how slow the EU can be in amending and changing regulations, with that process taking nearly 20 years.

In conclusion, I am glad to hear assurances on the future of British science and its funding, but the whole scientific community has a responsibility to secure the future of British science. It is for each and every one of our scientists to go across the world and tell everyone that we are open for business and that science has a bright future in the UK.

8.53 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of UK science and research, particularly in the two world-class universities in Bristol—the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England—one of which is in my constituency and the other just outside it, as well as the business and science incubators,
the catapults and the other institutions that value and need a good research environment in the European Union.

Since the referendum I have been talking with the universities about the impact on science and research of a possible exit from the EU. The science carried out at the University of Bristol is pioneering, from better early diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease to tackling antimicrobial resistance; from food security to understanding how we can prevent and stop violence against women. The University of Bristol has leading researchers doing vital work. Meanwhile, across the city in UWE work is being done on big data, developing food resilience, improving air quality, shaping sustainable suburbs and improving labour productivity. I am sure we all agree that those are important things.

If I may join in the Higgs boson name-check, Mr Higgs was in the class of 1946 in Cotham school in Bristol West. The school has educated not just Mr Higgs but my nephews and nieces and the sons of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), so I am very fond of it. I am glad to be able to get a Higgs mention in.

There are five key issues of concern for science and research, and they are linked; no single strand stands alone. Those issues, which were set out in the recent report by the Science and Technology Committee, are: funding—that has been mentioned quite a lot today, so I will not dwell on it—people, collaboration and influence, regulation, and facilities. As Professor Ian Diamond, chair of the Universities UK research policy network, explained, “there is no point having a regulatory framework if you do not have the talent; there is no point having the talent if you do not have access to the grants.”

Kevin Baughan, chief development officer at Innovate UK, said:

“We cannot really look at each of those parts individually. We need a strategy and a plan that allows us to move the whole ecosystem forward, because together they take world-class science and turn it into jobs and growth; and together they allow businesses to export, to compete in wider markets and to build broader partnerships.”

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), I am in favour of science for science’s sake, but I think it is critical that we are clear about the economic benefits of having world-class universities. The presence of the universities in Bristol contributes such a lot, as do the staff and the students, whether they decide to stay on after graduation or beyond the life of their research project. Some are telling me that they do not want to stay, and they feel as though they might as well take an offer from a university in Berlin, Bonn or Copenhagen. Some who have families or partners from the EU say they no longer feel welcome. That is a great worry to me.

Universities UK has said that it wants the Government to recognise that our universities are one of our best exports. They contribute to the economy directly through income generated, and indirectly through longer-term contributions to knowledge. I am not going to say anything else from that page of my speech, because someone else has already said it. I think it is good to junk things when they have already been said.

I have every confidence that the universities in Bristol can compete, whatever the circumstances they find themselves in, but the issues of concern that I have mentioned need to be tackled. As well as big universities such as the ones in my constituency, I am concerned about smaller universities, which often specialise in a particular field but which are less well-equipped than the larger universities, with their economies of scale, to weather any storm arising from the uncertainty about Brexit.

In Aberystwyth, the Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences—I have to declare an interest, because my niece is a PhD student there—conducts pioneering research into topics from ways to help crops to resist disease to finding out what microbes live in glaciers; that is the project my niece is involved in. Other small institutes such as the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, various institutes for music and the arts, the School of Oriental and African Studies and the Royal Agricultural University all have unique contributions to make. I worry that their size will make it harder for them to weather the storm.

I urge the Government to consider the various options for our relationship with the EU through the lens of what will make it easiest for our universities—of all shapes, sizes and specialisms—to continue to be the world-class institutes that they are. What agreements can we make on free movement of students and researchers? I might as well be honest and open, as I have been in every debate on Brexit so far, about the fact that I am a passionate believer in the value of the free movement of people, and I think that universities have a strong case to make for why that should apply to them.

What is the best regulatory framework for us to be in in order to collaborate with other EU universities? How can we make sure that British people are not delayed access to new medical treatments because of different rules? One way to ensure that the Government keep those things in mind is, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) mentioned, to have the voice of science in the process. I am deeply concerned by the fact that, as the report by the Science and Technology Committee mentions, the post of chief scientific adviser at the Department for Exiting the European Union has not yet been advertised. I hope that the Minister will be able to update us on that.

Finally, will the Minister tell us at the end of the debate whether the Government have considered the other recommendations in the report by the Science and Technology Committee? Will the Government commit to keeping student numbers out of the immigration targets and caps? If they have not yet prepared a response to the Select Committee report, when will they do so? I hope that the Minister will be able to answer some—or, ideally, all—of these questions, because the production of knowledge is one of the things we do best in this country and one of the things I am proudest of in my constituency.

8.59 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire).

Whatever our view of the United Kingdom’s place in the world, it is probably fair to say it is indisputable that the UK is a science giant. The impact our excellent science and research base has had on the country as a
whole has been profound, particularly in our great universities. As I have said previously, my constituency of Cambridge is particularly productive—a hive of science and innovation. The University of Cambridge has fostered almost 100 Nobel prize winners, and the city and surrounding area is home to a thriving network of life sciences and technology companies.

However, as Baroness of Ludlow once cautioned: “Unless we get smarter, we’ll get poorer”.

Eight years later, at a time when our relationship with Europe is at a crucial juncture, that warning is all the more significant. Unfortunately, in the words of Prospect, the trade union representing many people working in the sector:

“It is inescapable that the decision to Brexit has resulted in an instant reputational hit for UK science.”

Let me begin with a plea to the Government to provide concrete, real reassurances to the EU nationals working in science and research around the country. Existing EU research staff need certainty, which is sorely missing at the moment.

I recently visited a lab at the department of physiology, development and neuroscience at the University of Cambridge as part of a pairing scheme run by the Royal Society. I shadowed a neuroscientist-neurologist, Susanna Zeichner, who I rather feel covered every corner of how important it is for science that the movement of people and scientists is kept in place.

The evidence shows that the EU researchers attracted by the UK are at the top of their fields. More than half of European Research Council consolidator grant recipients in the UK in 2014 were non-UK EU citizens. The University of Cambridge argues that UK institutions risk losing this talent and the accompanying European Research Council funding should EU researchers no longer be attracted to the UK, which is the potential consequence of any restrictions on freedom of movement. Losing access to funding is not just about attracting talent; it is also about retaining it.

All of this is not just about the UK’s standing, but about scientific progress itself. Collaboration and the pooling of international talent are essential if we want our technology and financial services sectors to remain globally competitive.

Likewise, our technology sector is reliant upon retaining the cross-border sharing of international data flows is essential if we want our technology and financial services sectors to remain globally competitive. The Minister for Digital and Culture said in response to an Adjournment debate that I secured recently:

“We want a data protection framework that works best for the UK and meets our needs. Those consultations will be forthcoming.”

I wonder whether we can now be told when those consultations will be published. He also said that the Government were considering all options for the most beneficial way of ensuring that the UK’s data protection regime continues to build a culture of data confidence and trust, which safeguards citizens and supports businesses in a global data economy. Perhaps the Minister responding today can outline some of those options.

We need better answers from the Government and soon, or we risk seeing the great advantages and opportunities achieved by UK science and tech squandered, at great cost to us all.

9.6 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who I rather feel covered every corner of how important it is for science that the movement of people and scientists is kept in place.
I do not really apologise for being parochial; I am here to speak on behalf of Northern Ireland. I was vice-Chair of the Committee for Education in the Northern Ireland Assembly for three years. Under the previous Minister, I watched funding cuts for Sentinel, teaching and, basically, the whole of science, yet somehow Northern Ireland remained high up there with its results. However, we should keep in mind that this year it has dropped some six places in the science tables.

I spoke about this the week before last, but it is key to Northern Ireland, being an island off an island and having a land border with Ireland, that we keep our trade and the movement of people, which is becoming more essential to our economy. The universities want all universities in the United Kingdom to thrive. Queen’s University is very much part of the Russell Group. It sees it as absolutely essential to maintain mobility of staff and students throughout the whole of Europe, along with access to research funding and collaboration in projects. That is the key, so when Ministers look at Northern Ireland and Brexit, I ask them to ensure that research and development and the funding for universities are some of our top priorities.

We have Ulster University and Queen’s University, with the Magee campus in Londonderry. When it comes to funding, Ulster University has had £9.92 million to date and is looking to try and get another £10.5 million. Queen’s has attracted £61 million and wants to get more, but the message that they are sending us is that they need clarity. They want an end to the uncertainty. They know that the funding has been guaranteed up to when we leave, but after that they need to be able to promise something to the people they are trying to attract, so that we hold them there and do not lose them.

To borrow a little bit of the Christmas spirit, someone said to me last week that we should be following the star. All students follow the star: they want to go to the university where that star professor is, so we have to make sure that we keep the key people in the universities. If there is a key message to take on board, that is it. I am grateful for what the Chancellor has said and for the clarification, but in Northern Ireland we need to know that the funding will be ring-fenced and not lost in the Barnett formula and spent with other things. We need to make sure that it comes through to the universities.

I was pleased to see that one of the British Academy’s key points was about paying particular attention to Northern Ireland and working with the Irish. Another of its points, which we should all remember, was that 50% of academic papers are written with international partners. That is how it should remain. We should keep working together. That does not mean only Europe—we can and should look outwards to gather in specialists from the whole world.

Northern Ireland is well known for aerospace, defence, pharmaceuticals and medical research—one example would be Frank Puntridge, the cardiologist. Like all hon. Members, I could name plenty of people who have set examples, but we have to ensure that it happens into the future. At the moment, the anecdotes we are hearing tell us that Northern Ireland universities are losing out. People are already looking elsewhere for collaboration. We must ensure that we keep those people.

It is essential to take another point on board. The UCAS tells us that the number of students coming to Northern Ireland is 9% down on last year. We had increased the number every year until this year. We must look at what we are doing on science.

I have pleaded enough. I hate always making Northern Ireland a special case, but it is our home. It is important that we pull all those things together, work and see everywhere thrive.

9.11 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Few will be surprised if I approach today’s debate from a decidedly Scottish perspective. With five universities ranked in the top 200 academic institutions in the world, Scotland certainly punches above its weight, which is reflected in the world renowned academic research carried out north of border. The University of Edinburgh is one example. The research carried out there is truly groundbreaking. We would be hard-pushed to find someone who has not heard of the Higgs boson or Dolly the sheep. It is little wonder that the University of Edinburgh enjoys such a consistently high placing in international league tables.

We should rightly be concerned when that esteemed university warns of the risk of harm to the quality of its research posed by Brexit. In written evidence to the Scottish Parliament’s European and External Relations Committee, the institution gives a stark warning that our exit from the European Union could lead to fewer excellent researchers getting permission to apply to universities here; that fewer international universities will be willing to collaborate with UK universities and researchers; and that less funding could be available. It argues that that could lead to a loss of its global reputation, a loss of opportunities for UK researchers and scientists, and less high-quality advice being available to the Government and business. It warns that, in turn, that could seriously impact on our ability to tackle global problems such as clean energy, food security and ageing populations.

The Government seem capable only of sowing more confusion. There are reports that the Home Office is considering plans almost to halve the number of international student visas issued. Forty-two per cent. of students at the University of Edinburgh are EU and international students. Those proposals will only compound the stark Brexit warning it has issued.

One positive measure that the Government could take now is to give clarity that the immigration rights of EU nationals currently living in Scotland will not change in future. Such assurances would help forward planning and the retention of researchers and scientists. I recently received a letter from Professor Craig Mahoney, principal of the University of the West of Scotland, which plans to open a new state-of-the-art campus in my constituency. In the letter, he emphasises the huge importance of international students not only to universities but to our society and economy. He cites a report from BigGAR Economics, which found that the university generates £538 million gross value added in Scotland and supports almost 4,500 jobs. He stresses that a significant element of the corporate strategy of the university is to grow the number of international students. It is my belief that the uncertainty caused by Brexit seriously jeopardises that.
The immigration status of EU nationals is not some
negotiating piece for the Prime Minister, and treating it
as such is causing damage.

In addition to clarity on immigration, the Government
should start to give answers on future research funding.
The University of the West of Scotland has received
more than €740,000 of Horizon 2020 funding, with
Scottish higher education institutions receiving around
€165 million in total. The promise of a Treasury guarantee
for current Horizon 2020 funding is welcome, but simply
does not go far enough. The Government need to provide
the necessary certainty so that academic and research
institutions know that they will have enough support
for the duration of their projects. We also need a clear
sign of Government intent to put in place an equivalent
funding framework post Brexit.

The UK already compares very badly with its
competitors, and the decision to leave the EU will only
further exacerbate the UK Government’s failures in the
fields of science and innovation. The hugely negative
effect that will have on our economy cannot be understated.
The Scottish National party Scottish Government take
a very different approach, fostering innovation, investment
and internationalism. We want Scotland to become a
fairer and more competitive economy. Madam Deputy
Speaker, you can be assured that those of us on the SNP
Benches will not stand idly by and watch the Tories
wage war on our world-class education institutions.

Almost six months after the vote to leave the EU, it is
time for the Government to get their act together and
start coming up with some answers. I hope the Minister
will do so tonight.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am
grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important
debate on a subject that is very close to my heart. As an
NHS scientist before I came to this place, I worked in a
field that thrived on collaboration and recognised no
geographical boundaries.

As many Members have said, our UK universities are
righthly held in high esteem worldwide. We have 18 of the
top 100 universities in the world, including four in the
top 10. Listening to the hon. Member for South Antrim
(Danny Kinahan), I was pleased to hear that even the
Brexiters are remainers when it comes to our universities.

Danny Kinahan: I’m not a Brexiteer.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I’m one.

Liz McInnes: You’ll get your chance.

Looking at British science, it is well known that
Britain punches well above its weight in the international
university league tables. It does so mainly thanks to EU
grants. It is not awash with funding, and in fact has the
lowest per capita spending on research of any G7 country.

The referendum outcome has led to uncertainty about
its implications for the higher education sector. It is
easy to trot out the phrase “Brexit means Brexit”, but, as
ever, it is devil in the detail and, for the sake of the
future of science and research in this country, that
detail cannot be glossed over in a soundbite. There are
two aspects of the human and intellectual cost of Brexit
for universities. The first is the potential for another
brain drain. The second is the potential restrictions on
overseas research students.

I say another brain drain as it sadly would be nothing
new. Many senior figures in British universities remember
the lack of support from the Thatcher Government in the
‘80s and the exodus of scientists abroad. It is ironic
that the four British Nobel prize winners this year,
Duncan Haldane, David Thouless, Michael Kosterlitz
and Sir Fraser Stoddart, are all based in the US, having
been forced out during the 1980s brain drain. British
research scientists are worried that the Prime Minister’s
mantra of “Brexit means Brexit” will lead to a lack of
funding and grants for British science and the potential
for a modern-day brain drain.

Added to that is the potential for UK universities to
become less attractive to international research students.
The vice-chancellors of the London School of Economics,
King’s College, London, and Bristol have already voiced
their fears about recruitment of international students,
and the serious potential financial and human resource
consequences for our universities.

The vice-chancellor of Cambridge University, Professor
Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, is a stalwart remover, but in
common with many who voted to remain, he is a
pragmatist who wants Cambridge to get the best out of
Brexit. He says that to achieve this the Government
must provide some basic clarity on what exactly Brexit
means. He is asking for three things from the Government:
clarity on the national status of university staff; a
recognition of the collaborative ideal implicit in EU
projects; and a Government guarantee of vital university
budgets.

I hope the vice-chancellor’s requests will be heeded
by the Government. He is, after all, what some might
regard as something of an expert. Although the people
of this country were urged not to listen to experts
during the referendum, on this subject, and indeed on
many others affected by the Brexit negotiations, it is
absolutely vital that the Government pay heed to our
fears. They are not asking for a running commentary;
they are asking for clarity and a coherent, informed
plan as to the exact nature and manner of our departure
from the EU. The EU makes substantial financial
contributions to research in UK universities. Research
funding from the EU amounts to around £1 billion per
year, while our own national research budget is below
international averages.

I represent a Greater Manchester constituency and
universities across our region have more than 4,000 EU
students currently on campuses. That equates to spending
of £90 million per year not just on tuition fees, but on
expenditure in the local economy. Manchester University,
which is 29th in the world’s top 100 universities, received
£48 million in research funding in the past two years
alone. The loss of such substantial funding and a failure
to attract EU students could not fail to have a detrimental
effect on our area. I cannot lay claim to a connection
with Mr Higgs, but in a recent interview on the effect of
Brexit one of Manchester University’s most famous
academics, Professor Brian Cox—who, like me, was
born in Oldham—said:

“The central issue for science is that it’s a global pursuit. I work
at the Hadron Collider at CERN in Geneva. That’s a global
project. The thing scientists and universities are most worried
about is movement of people around the world. We need to say
this is a country where you're welcome to live and study and do science. But at the moment, the image we're representing to Europe and the rest of the world isn't the right one.”

9.22 pm  

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am very pleased to be able to speak in this debate. As a health spokesperson, I take a great interest in medical research and I am intensely proud of our universities in Northern Ireland, which are top in their field of medical research. I am also very happy to follow the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes).

I always, unashamedly, go out to bat for Northern Ireland and Strangford, and I will do so today. As a Brexiteer—one who voted to leave and was very proud that the people of the United Kingdom and my constituency also made that decision—I see an opportunity. The Centre for Cancer Research and Cell Biology at Queen’s University Belfast is a cross-faculty, interdisciplinary research centre with over 300 clinical and basic researchers from across the world. It achieves the highest quality of research excellence. Research in the institute extends from population studies of cancer etiology, through tumour biology and clinical trials, to outcomes and health services research. The institute is committed to fostering interdisciplinary investigation of areas of cancer control that lie at the interface between fundamental, clinical and population research. The three are currently populated by approximately 250 faculty, graduate and post-doctoral trainees and support staff. Opportunities for graduate and post-doctoral training are offered in partnership with several departments at the university, including: biomedical, anatomy and cell biology, biochemistry, microbiology, immunology, pharmacology and toxicology, community health and epidemiology, mathematics and statistics, oncology, pathology and medicine, and Queen’s school of policy studies. All that is done with expertise at Queen’s University. The institute is supported by the Terry Fox Foundation, in partnership with the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

This high level of research needs a highly qualified and specialist skill set. It is clear that in leaving the EU we need to ensure that that skill set is protected and that our universities are able to continue their priceless work. I support the recent call by the president of the Royal Society in the Financial Times to ensure that we continue to build on our position as a world leader in science and innovation. We are doing that in Northern Ireland, and we want to continue to do that. We are looking to the Government simply to make sure that that happens. I have every faith that the Brexit team understands the necessity of the arrangements that need to be put in place to ensure that this knowledge and skill share can and will take place. I see the Minister nodding in appreciation, and I am sure that it will be confirmed further in a few moments when he rises to speak.

It is clear that UK research benefits from the immigration of top foreign researchers to the UK. These include several Nobel prize winners, so we must have in place the ability to ensure that they are able to live and work here for the benefit of the UK and our scientific and research industry. As the President of the Royal Society has said:

“Today, 30% of our academic research staff are from abroad and a third of UK start-ups were founded by non-UK nationals. We are second only to the US as a destination for global talent. Their presence ensures that we remain first-rate, and importantly, produces a first-rate environment for training home-grown talent. Losing them would be a disaster for our economy. We need to take immediate steps to reassure those who are here that they remain welcome.”

And they are welcome; we want them to stay. I hope the Minister will say this very clearly in a few moments. The role played by foreign scientists and graduates must not be overlooked or underestimated. They are an essential component in the cog of our industry, and I am taking the opportunity to underline that fact and put it on the record in this Chamber today.

In 2015, over half of the UK’s research output was the result of an international collaboration, and these collaborations are increasing. The European Research Council, which is part of Horizon 2020 and funds frontier research purely on the basis of scientific excellence, has established a very strong international reputation. In Queen’s University, we have international partnerships with companies and businesses, with other universities across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and indeed across the world—all coming together to bring the needed scientific excellence right there at Queen’s University in Belfast in Northern Ireland. Although this funding stream does not require international collaboration, 58% of papers with ERC funding have co-authors who are based in other countries.

Collaboration enhances the quality of scientific research, improves the efficiency and effectiveness of that research and is increasingly necessary, as the scale of both budgets and research challenges grow. I am sure that in his response, the Minister will confirm that the collaboration that already takes place will continue post-Brexit and into the future. The primary driver of most collaboration, however, is the scientists themselves. In developing their research and finding answers, scientists are seeking to work with the best people, best institutions and best equipment that complement their research, wherever they may be. It just happens that most of those good people are in Belfast at Queen’s University.

This collaboration must be maintained and enhanced, which brings me back to my foundation point about Brexit: this is an opportunity to put in place mutually beneficial co-operation between countries that we must make the most of. I believe we have an opportunity to do just that. We work better as a team, and Brexit must take the opportunity to put in place the rules that enhance the games and bring the best results. I have every confidence in the Brexit Minister and his team here in this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—we are better together!

9.28 pm  

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Before I start to conclude the debate, it is worth noting that, as you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, while we have been debating this important issue, somebody has driven a lorry into a Christmas market in the heart of Berlin, killing nine people. I am sure that I speak on behalf of the whole House in expressing our solidarity with the German people at this time and our shared commitment to work together to oppose all those who challenge the democratic values that we share across Europe.
This is the third of our general debates on exiting the European Union, and I am sure that at some stage the Government will tell us all the hours we have spent in the Chamber and claim that it in some way represents the involvement of Parliament in the Brexit process. I see the Minister nodding. However, that misses the point. Although we have had a very interesting debate, in which Members on both sides have demonstrated their understanding of and commitment to the importance of science and research in the economic future of our country, we have not been much illuminated on the Government’s thinking or plans, which I had thought—perhaps naively—would have something to do with these general debates.

I welcome the many speeches that were made today, particularly the powerful maiden speech from the new hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). No doubt the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) will pass on my view—which I am sure is shared throughout the House—that her speech demonstrated that she will add real value to this place. She rightly emphasised that we have become a divided country, and spoke of the need for leadership—a leadership which I think is sadly lacking at present.

As I have said, we are no clearer about how the Government aim to protect science and research in the Brexit negotiations. For example, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), the Chair of the Education Committee, asked the Minister a relatively simple and straightforward question—whether the Government would seek associate country status in successor programmes to Horizon 2020—but we received no answer.

Members have pointed out throughout the debate that as we navigate our way in an increasingly competitive world, the future of our economy will depend heavily on research and innovation. Many have talked of our strengths, but there are also weaknesses which we need to recognise. A particular weakness is the lack of investment in research and development. We have slipped from leading the OECD countries in respect of spending as a percentage of GDP in 1979 to trailing behind all our competitors. The United States invests 2.8% of its GDP in R and D, and OECD countries, like the EU, average 2.4%, but the UK invests just 1.7%, less than half the 3.9% invested by South Korea, which, as a result, remains a major manufacturing nation.

As was pointed out by many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), one of our strengths—and it is considerable—is the research capacity of our universities. However, that strength will be at risk if the Government get Brexit wrong. What does getting it wrong look like in relation to research and science? What are the risks? In an excellent report published by the Science and Technology Committee, its Chair, the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), highlighted the five key issues: funding, people, collaboration, regulation and facilities. He also rightly expressed a fear that if we were not careful, science could be one of the casualties of Brexit. I am sure that all of us, throughout the House, share a desire for that not to be the case, in which context it would be useful if the Minister answered the hon. Gentleman’s question about what the Department would appoint a chief scientific adviser.

Because our universities are so good, as many have pointed out, we do disproportionately well from EU research funding, better per head than any other EU country. As we heard from the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), EU programmes provide nearly 15% of UK university research funding, and we can all agree on the importance of that funding. With it comes critical collaboration, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) was right to refer to the pan-European collaboration that comes through involvement in Horizon 2020 and its predecessor programmes. All that will be at risk if research is not placed centre stage in the Brexit negotiations.

The second point made by the Chair of the Select Committee was about people. Again because our universities are so good, they attract great staff from all over the world. Some 28% of academics are non-UK citizens, and 15% are from EU countries. When it comes to key research staff, the proportion is much higher—more than half in some STEM subjects. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), we have all heard stories of jobs declined, or of those already here questioning their future in the UK because the Government will not give the assurance for which the House asked in July: a unilateral commitment that those who are currently in the UK will be able to stay when we leave the EU, on the same terms that they currently enjoy. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) pointed out, we should never forget that these are highly mobile people. They do not have to be here; they have lots of other offers available to them. They are not a drain; they are an asset to the UK.

If we leave the EU with no deal on the future movement of workers, we will fall back on current immigration rules which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) pointed out, will not work because there are tens of thousands of early-career academics and researchers who will not meet the tier 2 income threshold, which could create a crisis for our research community.

As with staff, so with students, as the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) and others pointed out. Around 125,000 of our 436,000 international students are from the EU, and their future is uncertain. A survey before 23 June indicated that one third of non-EU students would find the UK a less attractive destination if we chose to leave. The worst outcome is we could lose more than half of our international students currently in the UK, costing billions of pounds, as my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) pointed out, highlighting the impact on her local economy, which will be repeated in local economies across the country. That will not only cost money and jobs, but will bring into question the viability of many courses, particularly postgraduate courses, and particularly in STEM subjects, which would no longer be available to UK students.

One would imagine that the Government would be seeking to mitigate this risk by setting out a clear strategy for maintaining our position as a destination of choice for international students. But instead the Home Secretary has, extraordinarily, put international students at the centre of her plans to cut migration, making a bad situation worse.

What do we need from the Brexit negotiations? First, we need a plan. I am pleased that the House agreed, and we are looking forward to seeing it so that we can start some meaningful debates to replace the general debates.
we are enjoying so much at the moment. Clearly the Minister is not going to share the plan at this stage, but I hope he will share his views on a few key questions that will be central to it.

On funding, will the Minister give a clear commitment that the Government will prioritise research and innovation in the negotiations with our partners in Europe, with a view to ensuring continued UK participation in EU research programmes, not just for the full duration of Horizon 2020 but for framework programme 9 and successor programmes? Will he outline beyond the £2 billion already announced—which I think takes our R and D investment as a percentage of GDP from 1.7% to 1.9%, on a rough calculation—what plans he has to strengthen support for research and innovation more widely to mitigate any damage from leaving the EU?

On staff, will the Minister press for the earliest confirmation that EU nationals working in our universities and on research programmes in the private sector can remain on current terms without having to apply for leave to remain, as my hon. Friend for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) argued? Will the Minister go further and say what assurances the Government will give to those who join our universities during the pre-Brexit period until 2019, because if there are no such assurances, recruitment will be made significantly more difficult? What representations is the Minister making about future visa arrangements post-Brexit so that we can continue to enjoy the benefits of securing the services of the best researchers from the EU and the rest of the world?

On students, does the Minister agree that we need early clarity on fee levels and access to student funding for EU students? We have it for next year, but what about 2018-19, and will it apply to postgraduates as well as undergraduates? Does he agree that we need to confirm the immigration status of existing and prospective EU students and their right to remain in the UK for work and postgraduate study?

Among the many issues we face, these are relatively straightforward questions, but an awful lot depends on the answers. If the Minister cannot answer them fully tonight, I hope he will ensure that the answers are in the plan that we will see in the new year, because our economy and our future as a country depend on it.

9.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). First, I should like to echo his comments about the appalling loss of life in Berlin. I am sure that the whole House will join us in expressing solidarity with and sympathy for the victims. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families affected, and we should stand shoulder to shoulder with Germany and our European allies and partners after a terrible incident of this sort.

This has been an excellent debate and I would like to thank all hon. Members who have contributed, particularly the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), who made an accomplished maiden speech and who spoke about Parliament bringing people together after the referendum. I agree that it is the responsibility of all of us to aim to do that. This has been the third in the series of debates on important issues arising in the context of the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union that was promised by the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). I would like to note how fruitful my ministerial colleagues and I have found these debates. I am also glad that the hon. Member for Sheffield Central has enjoyed them so much. I had the very first debate in Westminster Hall when the House returned after the summer recess, and it is a delight to conclude this term with the last major Government debate in the main Chamber.

The UK’s global status as a science and research superpower is fundamental to our wider economic competitiveness. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) described it as the engine of prosperity. This Government want the UK to be the go-to place for innovators and investors across the world, and we intend to secure the right outcome for the UK research base as we exit the European Union. This debate has highlighted some of the issues that we know we will have to consider as we negotiate to leave the EU, but retaining and building on our science and research base is a top priority that is shared by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, as we have seen today.

Before I begin to respond to some of the helpful points raised by Members, I would like to take time to point to the action that the Government have already taken to secure our place in the world of research and science.

The Government are determined to ensure that all relevant views from stakeholders are reflected in our analysis of the options for the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. We are conducting a range of meetings with stakeholders to build national consensus around our negotiating position. This includes a wide programme of engagement within the Department to ensure that the views of the research and science sectors are heard. I should like to reassure the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) that we are, in fact, listening to experts.

My ministerial colleagues and I have met a number of higher education institutions and groups, including Universities UK, the National Academies, the Russell Group and the Universities of Swansea, Reading, Ulster and Strathclyde, to name but a few. Just last week, I attended the new stakeholder working group on EU exit, universities, research and innovation, hosted by the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson). The sector strongly supports our ambition to create an environment in which the UK as a whole can continue to be a world leader in research, science and the tertiary education sector.

We are also continuing to talk to representatives of the science and technology sectors. Between myself and ministerial colleagues, we have recently met Sir Mark Walport, the Government chief scientific adviser, as well as the presidents of the Royal Society and the Royal Academies and representatives from the life sciences, environment, chemicals, space and tech sectors. I want to reassure the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who spoke passionately about data, that the digital sector has advocated a strong position on the freedom of movement of data.
I have also enjoyed giving evidence to the Select Committee chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), and I welcome the report, to which the Government will respond in full at a later date. To answer a point raised by him and by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias), I point out that we are working closely with the Government's chief scientific adviser and the Government Office for Science to ensure that we have access to the expertise that we need. I recently visited Surrey Satellites in Guildford to see at first hand the levels of innovation in the UK space industry, which the science Minister was right to praise in his opening speech. We will continue to meet such stakeholders in the coming months.

The Government have already taken action on some of the concerns raised by such groups. The Treasury will underwrite all successful bids for Horizon 2020 that are approved by the European Commission, even when specific projects continue beyond our departure from the EU, giving British participants and their EU partners the assurance and certainty needed to plan ahead for projects that can run over many years. The Treasury guarantee sends a clear message to UK businesses and universities that they should continue to bid for competitive EU funding while we remain a member of the EU. My right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), with whom it was such a pleasure to work during her time as Education Secretary, gave an important example of where restored funding was a direct result of the guarantee. It will help ensure that the UK continues to be a world leader in international research and innovation.

We have provided further assurance to universities by confirming that existing EU students and those starting courses in 2016-17 and 2017-18 will continue to be eligible for student loans and home fee status for the duration of their courses. We recently extended that assurance to postgraduate support through research council studentships, which will remain open to EU students starting courses in the 2017-18 academic year. The funding support will cover the duration of their course, even if the course concludes after the UK has left the EU. As the Science Minister said earlier, we will decide the policy for the 2018-19 academic year in good time for applications.

The hon. Member for Sheffield Central and his Front-Bench colleague, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central, challenged the Government on our science funding, but at a time of tight control over overall public spending it is significant that the Government were able to protect the science budget, with a total investment of £26 billion between 2016-17 and 2020-21. We have been going even further to support a healthy science and technology ecosystem in this country. The Government recently committed to substantial real-terms increases in Government investment in R and D, rising to an extra £2 billion a year by 2020-21, to help put Britain at the cutting edge of science and technology. I join my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock, who is Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, and my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) in welcoming that.

A new industrial strategy challenge fund will direct some investment to scientific research and the development of a number of priority technologies in particular, helping to address Britain’s historic weakness in commercialisation and turning our world-leading research into long-term success. To realise the full economic potential of new technologies, we have also announced a review of the support for organisations undertaking research through the tax system, looking at the global competitiveness of the UK offer. The Treasury will look at whether we can make this support even more effective to ensure that the UK continues to encourage innovation actively. Ultimately, we need to ensure that our world-beating science and research base maintains global research excellence in our institutions, innovation in our businesses, and strong local economies across the UK.

It was striking to hear hon. Members from both sides of the House, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) and for Canterbury (Mr Brazier), my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough, and the hon. Members for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan), speak passionately about the benefits that science, universities and research bring to their constituencies. While we can be confident that our fundamentals are strong, we need fully to evaluate the consequences, challenges and opportunities to UK science and innovation of leaving the EU. That will take time, and I am grateful in the support and challenge that we have received from this House and from a wide range of informed sources.

I see continued confidence in the UK as a natural home for and world leader in science and innovation. Since the referendum, for example, we have welcomed many hundreds of millions of pounds of new investment in the life sciences and pharmaceuticals sector from Alnylam, GSK and AstraZeneca, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield; an £80 million investment in space technology from Seraphim Capital; and important job announcements from Google, Facebook, Microsoft and IBM, which will build four new data centres here in the UK. A recent survey by the CBI shows that 70% of businesses plan to increase or maintain their innovation spending following the vote to leave the EU. Only 7% plan to reduce their investment. The UK has always been one of the most innovative nations on the face of the earth, and I am certain that it will remain so.

I will now respond to some of the helpful points raised by hon. Members from across the House. We have covered a wide range of topics today, so I want to try to summarise the comments made and what I have learned across three key areas: funding, people, and collaboration.

As my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation and I have both already set out, UK businesses should continue to bid for competitive EU funds while we remain a member of the EU, and we will work with the Commission to ensure payment when funds are awarded. The Treasury will underwrite the payment of such successful awards, even when specific projects continue beyond the UK’s departure from the EU. The Government have also reassured organisations that structural and investment fund projects signed before the UK withdraws from the EU will be guaranteed by the Treasury after we leave, up to 2020. These projects will have to provide strong value-for-money evidence and be in line with UK strategic priorities. We have heard submissions from across the House on the
future relationship with Horizon 2020, and it is too early to speculate on the detail of our future relationship with that and its successor programmes. The UK Government are committed to ensuring that we remain a world leader in research and innovation.

The views expressed in the House today, including by many who campaigned to leave, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), have echoed what we have been hearing from stakeholders on the importance of research mobility. We are carefully considering the impact of this across the sector, but our ambition is to create an immigration system that allows us to control numbers, and encourage the brightest and the best to come to this country.

Jim Shannon: May I invite the Minister to visit Queen’s University Belfast? That would encourage people there, it would be a chance to show businesses what we are doing and it would allow the partnerships at Queen’s University to grow even more.

Mr Walker: I would be delighted to accept the hon. Gentleman’s invitation. I have already visited one university in Northern Ireland, but I would be delighted to visit another, as soon as the opportunity arises.

There has been no change to the rights and status of EU nationals in the UK, or of British citizens in the EU, as an immediate result of the referendum. The Prime Minister has been clear that during negotiations she wants to protect the status of EU nationals already living here, and the only circumstances in which that would not be possible are if British citizens’ rights in European member states were not protected in return. I was glad to hear her repeat in her statement today her desire to see such a deal come early. Looking to the future, I will repeat again what my Secretary of State has said before:

“We will always welcome those with the skills, the drive and the expertise to make our nation better still. If we are to win in the global marketplace, we must win the global battle for talent. Britain has always been one of the most tolerant and welcoming places on the face of the earth. It must and it will remain so.”

Jim Dowd: Let us get back to the issue of the status of EU nationals in this country. Everybody will have noticed the somewhat embarrassing position in which the Prime Minister found herself at the European Council when she raised this issue; her next remarks apparently were, “I think I’d better leave”, which got no response at all. I am sure the Minister will not be able to answer this authoritatively, but what is preventing the Government from offering that undertaking now and then going on to article 50 discussions at the later date?

Mr Walker: I simply say to the hon. Gentleman that it is very clear that the Government have the ambition of securing that through the negotiations. We have raised the issue at the European Council and the response the Government have received is that there is no negotiation without notification. We need to secure this issue through the negotiations. However, as many colleagues have said, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) and the hon. Member for Strangford, there are opportunities to support the needs of the research and scientific communities to attract global talent in the future. It is a mark of success that the UK is the second greatest destination for international students after the USA.

This debate has underscored what we have been hearing as to just how vital international collaboration is to successful research. We have also heard about the importance of access to European and global research infrastructures. Every international collaboration is different, and we will need to look carefully at all of them to ensure that UK scientists continue to have access to cutting-edge equipment and co-operations. In the majority of cases, UK access to research facilities is not dependent on being a member of the EU. For example, at CERN, we are a member in our own right and this will continue. The European Space Agency is another example of where our involvement is not dependent on the EU, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation has mentioned the continued investments we are making there.

We have taken no final decisions on how our future relationship on research with the EU will look. There are a number of options under consideration, but let me stress that international collaboration in this space is nothing new. We are thinking through how best UK researchers can continue to be able to work with the very best of their international counterparts, both European and more widely. We start from a strong basis: a recent survey showed that 47.6% of UK articles were internationally co-authored. In line with our Prime Minister’s vision for a global Britain, we should seek to keep building on that. The decision to double our investment in the Newton Fund was a positive statement of intent in this regard. As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport made clear, we must take the broader global opportunities. I should add that the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), who is no longer in his place—[Interruption.] Oh, there he is—sorry. I greatly welcome the hon. Gentleman’s endorsement of our strategy for the great repeal Bill.

I would like to close by saying that the Government are committed to ensuring that research and innovation in the UK will continue to be a major success story after we withdraw from the EU.

Thangam Debbonaire: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Walker: I will not; I have given way many times already.

As the Prime Minister said earlier, we will negotiate to reflect the kind of mature, co-operative relationship that friends and allies enjoy. That should include the fields of science and research, which are vital to our country’s prosperity, security and wellbeing. We are determined to ensure that people and businesses have stability and certainty in the period leading up to our departure from the EU and that we use the opportunities that that departure presents to reinforce our own priorities as a United Kingdom. In the field of research, Britain is not just a European leader but a global one, and throughout the process we will be doing all we can to ensure that we stay that way. The excellence of our research and the attractiveness of the UK as a place to do it are fundamental to our success.
As well as a more or less complete life history of Mr Higgs of Higgs boson fame, we heard a number of bids during this debate: from my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier) for a medical school; from my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough for a life sciences centre; and from my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield for a world heritage site. There was also a request from the hon. Member for South Antrim for extra funding for Northern Ireland.

Although I am afraid I am not in a position to play Santa Claus from the Dispatch Box, I assure those Members that their pleas will have been heard. Speaking personally, I hope they get all the presents that they wished for. Mr Speaker, I take this opportunity to thank hon. Members on both sides for their contributions today and to wish them and you a merry Christmas and all the best for 2017.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered exiting the EU and science and research.

Business without Debate

COMMITTEES

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will take motions 2 to 6 together.

Ordered,

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT
That Margaret Greenwood be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Scott Mann and Joan Ryan be added.

FINANCE
That Mark Garnier be discharged from the Finance Committee and Mark Menzies be added.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
That Adam Holloway be discharged from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and John Stevenson be added.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES
That Mims Davies be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Philip Davies be added.

WORK AND PENSIONS
That John Glen be discharged from the Work and Pensions Committee and Royston Smith be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

Bradford Bulls and Rugby League

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

9.57 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Thank you for granting me this important debate, Mr Speaker. Ten years ago, the Bradford Bulls were the dominant force in rugby league—not just here in the UK, but in the world. In 20 years of the Super League, Bradford have been champions four times, jointly holding the record for the most titles. They won the league twice prior to the creation of the Super League and have been runners up in the top flight five times.

The Challenge Cup has been brought back to Bradford five times from the club’s 11 appearances in the prestigious tournament’s final. Bradford has won the World Club Challenge, where the European champions take on the champions of Australia, a total of three times—again, jointly holding the record for the club with the most wins in the competition. Bradford Bulls were also the first team ever to win the domestic treble in 2003.

Prior to the Super League, the Bulls were called Bradford Northern and the club was a founding member of the Rugby Football League in 1895. Its stadium at Odsal is in my Bradford South constituency, and it has been the home of the club since 1934. When Bradford moved to the Odsal, it was the biggest stadium in the country outside Wembley and it remains to this day the country’s largest rugby league club ground. In fact, the Odsal holds the record for rugby league attendance. In 1954, 102,569 spectators watched Warrington beat Halifax in the Challenge Cup final replay at the Odsal.

But the success of the Bulls extends beyond the field of play. Their connection with and development of rugby at the grassroots and in the community is noteworthy. Bradford’s community work is outstanding. Its foundation received the much-coveted Foundation of the Year award this year, and it worked with more than 30,000 people in 2016 alone. It runs 15 separate community projects, including coaching in local primary and secondary schools. The Sky Try project has been one of the most successful and has been delivered in association with the Rugby Football League and Sky TV in over 100—

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9 (3)).

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

Judith Cummins: In over 100 Bradford schools.

The Bulls are responsible for some truly amazing work growing the popularity and profile of rugby league in their own district. Participation in rugby league has increased by more than 50% in Bradford this year, and the number of women getting involved is increasing. Some 5% of all registered participation in rugby league in the country is in Bradford, and the figure has increased by roughly 1% every year for the past three years. Aside from the Bulls, there are 15 rugby league clubs within a 5-mile radius of Bradford city centre.
The legacy of the Bradford Bulls on the field and their incredible work off the field, as well as their strong contribution to developing rugby league and their work with their local community, demonstrate just how important and valuable Bradford is to rugby league.

**Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab):** I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to some of the fantastic wins Bradford Bulls have had over many years. Does she agree that, in a place like Bradford, with its high levels of deprivation, we need to do more to encourage young people and women to participate in sport?

**Judith Cummins:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

Today, however, the Bulls are a shadow of their former glorious selves. Worse still, the club and its impressive legacy are on the cusp of being lost forever. The Bradford Bulls entered administration last month—the third time since 2012. This was devastating news for my constituency. The Bulls are a highly respected institution in my constituency—as a sports club, an employer and a valued and proactive member of the local community. The impact was felt not just by the tens of thousands of loyal fans but, equally, by the city of Bradford and the wider region. It is also a major blow to the rugby league family.

Despite their relegation to the championship, caused by a points deduction from a previous period in administration, Bradford have continued to attract big crowds. In fact, the club has been responsible for just over a quarter of the total combined attendances in the championship for the last two regular seasons. The golden era of Bradford Bulls may have passed for now, but the Bulls retain an enormous presence in the world of rugby league. That presence cannot and must not be lost.

The Bradford Bulls need a solid foundation from which the club can be rebuilt, securing its future for generations to come—for the good of the club, its fans, its players and its staff, for the good of the city and for the good of the sport. Rescued, and with a future in the league and the chance to rebuild, the Bulls could recapture their past glory and continue to be a positive force for Bradford and rugby league.

It seems to me that the Rugby Football League, Bradford Council and, indeed, myself are on the same page when it comes to the future of the Bulls: we agree that rugby league has to be at the centre of any deal that brings the Bulls out of administration. There is a lot of work going on to make sure that that happens and that the club survives. I have met the administrators and know just how much work they, among many, many others, are doing.

My worry is that the site and its stadium—the Wembley of the north—are the focus of many potential suitors. I am worried that rugby is of little to no interest, and at best nothing more than a fleeting interest, to some of those interested in taking the reins at the Bulls—not all, but at least some. There is no doubt that the site at Odsal has considerable potential, which must be realised, but rugby league must be at the heart of that, and I hope it will be. The future does not have to be bleak. People in Bradford should expect top-level rugby league to be played in our city. Bradford is rugby league’s heartland. Bradford has boundless potential to restate its importance to rugby league and to re-establish itself as the spiritual home of the sport. Soon Bradford will be home to a new rugby league museum, which, of course, I welcome.

Bradford Council and the Rugby Football League both have a major interest in the site at Odsal. The council owns a great deal of the land around and near to Odsal. How exciting would that unique partnership be for the owner of the rugby club, right in the heart of rugby league country? Working together, the Bulls could be at the centre of an exciting regeneration at Odsal, and the regeneration of a historic and important rugby club. There is potential for far more. This is where I hope that the Minister will take particular note. The Odsal is the best located rugby ground in the country. It is the biggest, the best connected, and the most accessible, and, as I said, it is right in the heart of rugby league’s homeland. It is the northern powerhouse of sport. Bradford can claim to be the national powerhouse of rugby league; I have no doubt of that. The dream of what the Bulls and Odsal could become is very much what the northern powerhouse is all about. All it takes is the right owner, a brave and forward-looking council, the expertise and drive of a committed RFL, and the boldness to invest.

You know as well as I, Mr Speaker, that rugby is a bold sport: it is not for the faint-hearted. However, when push comes to shove, those with a role in this affair—those charged with safeguarding and developing the future of the club and the sport—must not shy away from the difficult challenges that are now apparent.

I cannot fail to mention how we have got here and the broader context within sport today. There is a great deal of work to do, not just by rugby but across sport, to tackle the profiteers who seek to plunder clubs and strip them of their very essence. Be they rugby clubs or football clubs, there is a serious issue with ownership in sport and with some of the people who take on our clubs. This is another point where I trust that the Minister will pay particular attention. How has this been allowed to happen to the Bradford Bulls three times in five years? What is wrong in today’s sporting culture that means that proud sporting institutions can be humbled and shamed in such a degrading fashion? Why does the law not successfully protect our sporting institutions? As we too often see elsewhere in sport, the fit and proper person test, although a strong safeguard in theory, does not, all too often, deliver what it should in practice.

The RFL’s rules are designed to do two things: first, to prohibit people who have or could have an adverse impact on the game and prohibit any club from controlling or influencing any other club; and, secondly, perhaps more importantly, to protect the long-term health, vitality and viability of our clubs. We are some distance from finding out why the Bradford Bulls have ended up in this position again, but there will be many questions for the RFL to answer. Are its fit and proper person rules too narrow? Do the rules help to create a culture and a vision of integrity in ownership? Do the rules protect the best interests of the clubs who are always the first to be most damaged? Are the rules robust enough? Sadly, I fear they are not.
I hope that the Minister can offer me assurances about the future of community clubs such as the Bradford Bulls. I ask specifically for assurances that our grounds will be protected from property speculators, ensuring that the sport itself is at the centre of any plans rather than the site it sits on, and that ownership of our clubs will be scrutinised more broadly fully to assess who is a fit and proper person. I would appreciate her thoughts on how her Department can help to make sure that this does not happen to the Bradford Bulls again. How can she ensure that the future of rugby league is protected, not just in Bradford but across the country? Will she support my call for a Select Committee hearing on the ownership of sports clubs that would go beyond the Bradford Bulls and beyond rugby league to look at the ownership of sports clubs more generally?

The ownership of the assets of a community sports club is a crucial issue. It sets the direction for the club and it is vital that the owners have a genuine interest in the club. A club’s assets, including its name, colours, badge and home, should not be tampered with without the consent of its most powerful stakeholders, the fans.

Rugby league is a sport that has never lost touch with its roots. It is and always has been the sport of working men and women, both on the pitch and on the terraces. Rugby league, led by clubs such as Bradford, is a sport that is strengthening itself at the grassroots and in the community. Rugby league, Bradford, the fans and the people of my constituency deserve better than what has happened to the Bradford Bulls. I hope that the Minister will commit to helping me understand how things have gone so wrong so many times.

10.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I thank the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) for calling this debate on the future of the Bradford Bulls and rugby league. Despite being a soft southerner, I am a huge rugby league fan. One of my favourite players is Jamie Peacock, who is a legend of both Bradford Bulls and Leeds Rhinos, which is my team. I am grateful that it is you in the Chair, Mr Speaker, and not your Warrington-supporting deputy.

Before turning to the specific issues that the hon. Lady raised, I would like to quickly pay tribute to Mike “Stevo” Stephenson, a rugby league legend who stepped down from the commentary box at the end of last season. His enthusiasm for the game was infectious and we armchair rugby league enthusiasts will miss him immensely next season.

I was sorry to hear of the Bulls’ recent financial problems and can appreciate that this is a deeply concerning time for the club and its fans. Rugby league clubs such as the Bulls are of huge importance to their local communities in so many ways and have such a positive impact at the grassroots of the sport. The club’s proud heritage, both as Bradford Northern and now as the Bulls, dates back to the very formation of the Rugby Football League more than 120 years ago. The Odsal stadium is notable for hosting the record rugby league attendance of more than 102,000 in the 1954 challenge cup final, and the club has continued to have great success over the years, winning the challenge cup five times and being the first club to win the domestic treble in 2003.

Many of the current England pack have come through the Bradford Bulls academy, and the Bradford Bulls foundation was judged foundation of the year at the Kingston Press championship awards 2016. The foundation has worked with nearly 34,000 people so far this year through 15 separate community projects, including primary and secondary schools coaching, play touch rugby league, the junior bulls academy and activity camps.

As the hon. Lady has said, the Sky Try project has also been hugely successful. It has been delivered to more than 100 primary and secondary schools in the Bradford district, strengthening relationships with community clubs. As she and the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) have said, the Bradford Bulls women’s team reached the women’s grand final in October, inspiring future generations of women and girls to get involved.

I have no doubt that the sport’s profile will continue to grow further in Bradford and beyond as we build up to the 2021 world cup, which was awarded to England in October, following the RFL’s bid to host the tournament. I was delighted, as I am sure the hon. Lady and all rugby league fans were, that the Government were able to support the successful bid with up to £25 million to enhance the tournament and its legacy. In that context of apparent health in the community, it is all the more concerning that the Bulls have not only had to go into administration, but had to do so for the third time in recent years.

The hon. Lady alluded to the role of HMRC in Bradford’s recent financial history. It would be inappropriate to pass verdict on the club’s individual financial status and circumstances while the administration process is ongoing, and against the backdrop of the strict duty of confidentiality set out in legislation. In general terms, HMRC will support businesses suffering short-term financial difficulties, but not those that are insolvent. HMRC does not enforce debts lightly, but, where the debtor cannot or will not pay, it will take such action where appropriate. It will instigate an insolvency only after all other avenues have been pursued to recover a debt and as a means to stop further debt accruing.

HMRC monitors actions to ensure that cases are worked on appropriately by insolvency professionals, and it will support actions that may increase returns to creditors, which in some cases may include HMRC. On the commencement of an insolvency, whether or not HMRC instigates the action, it will proceed no differently from any other creditor to finalise its claim. The administrator has a duty to investigate and administer the company within, as set out in insolvency legislation. HMRC will monitor these actions to make sure that the creditors’ interests are being met. In all those respects, HMRC will treat a rugby club no differently from any other company entering administration.

The future of Bradford Bulls and of the wider sport fundamentally depends on the ability of all those involved to deliver a sustainable business model. The Rugby Football League has a clear responsibility in supporting the sport to do this, ensuring that one such long-established club repeatedly being unable to recover its financial position is not the first indicator of endemic financial instability in the sport.

I will pick up on the specific issues that the hon. Lady raised about the owners and directors test with the Rugby Football League in the new year. In the meantime,
I am sure that she will be aware that work within the “round ball” football leagues has significantly reduced the frequency of insolvencies of their clubs, both with the strengthening of owners and directors tests and with the financial regulations to which clubs must comply to remain part of the domestic competitions. In that respect, much progress has been made within the sport of football, particularly in the lower leagues.

The financial instability that many football clubs have historically suffered is not an environment we should ever allow to creep back in to sport. Perhaps that is something from which the rugby league and other sports can learn lessons. The termination of the Bulls’ membership of the Rugby Football League, and the potential for points deductions in the new season, is obviously a key factor in re-securing the future ownership of the club. I urge the RFL to continue to work closely with the appointed administrator to ensure the future of the club in this respect.

The ongoing wellbeing of clubs such as the Bulls and healthy domestic leagues is of great importance to a thriving sports sector, and I am clear that financial stability is just one facet of how the sector must continue to develop. It is important that sports clubs have good governance in place to sustain and support their financial viability. That is why there will be a requirement for all bodies in receipt of public funding, including the RFL, to agree to a new code for sports governance. The new sports governance code will come into force from the next funding cycle in April 2017. Organisations will be required to have strong leadership in place, with the right checks and balances to minimise the likelihood of financial and integrity issues arising.

The hon. Lady reflected on the importance of protecting facilities and their sporting contribution to the local area. I encourage communities to consider the provisions in the Localism Act 2011 that allow local groups to nominate stadiums in their area as valuable assets, and therefore to ask their local authority to place them on the register of assets of community value. By demonstrating the social value of an asset, communities can be given a right to buy it and preserve that value, should the site be put up for sale.

Bradford Bulls are a positive force in their local community, and I have no doubt that their prompt reinstatement to the Rugby Football League would be a wonderful boost to the area and the sport more widely. Such reinstatement remains at the discretion of the RFL, and remains dependent on new owners being in place, but I understand that there are interested parties engaging with the appointed administrator. I hope this can deliver an exciting new phase for Bradford Bulls, and I wish the club the very best in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

10.18 pm

House adjourned.
Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): What plans he has made to improve the quality of clinical leadership in the NHS.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Evidence from all over the world suggests that higher standards of care for patients relate directly to the quality of clinical leadership. As we wish each other a merry Christmas, the whole House will also this morning remember the people of Berlin as they face up to yesterday’s horrific suspected terrorist attack. Germany and its capital Berlin have been beacons of freedom and tolerance in modern times, and all our thoughts and prayers are with them today.

Evidence from all over the world suggests that higher standards of care for patients relate directly to the quality of clinical leadership, which was why last month I announced a number of measures to increase the number of doctors and nurses in leadership roles in the NHS.

Lucy Allan: I thank my right hon. Friend. Friend for his response. Clinicians in Telford have been showing real leadership by rejecting a proposal to close a brand new women and children’s unit, and elements of our emergency services. The quango responsible for this idea has spent £3 million and taken three years to come up with the proposal, which has been rejected by local people and clinicians. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and my local colleagues to bring an end to this farce, and to ensure that we do not continue in limbo any longer?

Mr Hunt: I recognise the extent of my hon. Friend’s campaigning on this issue in Telford, and that she expresses the concerns of many of her constituents. As she knows, service changes must be driven locally and must have the support of local GP commissioners. She will also know that the actual situation, very frustratingly, has not led to consensus between clinicians in different parts of Telford and Shropshire. I agree that the process has taken much too long, and I am more than happy to meet her and to try to bring this situation to a close as quickly as possible.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): In a year when the Health Secretary has spent quite a lot of time knocking clinicians, it is good to hear him speak so positively about them. After four years in the job, what responsibility does he accept for the lack of suitably qualified individuals—not just clinicians—who are prepared to take on the top jobs in the NHS on a permanent basis?

Mr Hunt: I will tell the hon. Lady what I take responsibility for: more doctors, more nurses and more funding than ever before in the history of the NHS. We know that the highest standards are often achieved when there is strong clinical leadership. Only 54% of managers in this country are clinicians, compared with 74% in Canada and 94% in Sweden. That is why it is right that we do everything we can to encourage more clinicians into leadership roles.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the clinical leadership involved in the Getting It Right First Time initiative is important, not only because it will save £1.5 billion, which could be put back into patient care, but because patients will be in less pain and will end up having fewer revision operations, and some will even survive treatment that they would not otherwise have survived?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I thank him for bringing Professor Tim Briggs to see me to explain just how superb this programme is. Infection rates for orthopaedic surgery vary between one in 20 patients in some trusts to one in 500 in others. Getting this right can transform care for patients and save money at the same time.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I associate myself with the Secretary of State’s comments about Berlin, my one-time home.

Does the Secretary of State accept that we have the best clinical leaders anywhere in the world? The challenge facing the NHS is not one of clinical leadership, or the dedication or skill of staff, but one of chronic underfunding by this Conservative Government.

Mr Hunt: We do indeed have superb clinical leaders, such as Marianne Griffiths at Worthing, which was recently given an outstanding rating. We also have superb non-clinical leaders, such as David Dalton at Salford Royal. I would gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that if he is worried about funding, why did he stand in the election on a platform that would have seen the NHS have £1.3 billion less this year?

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Will the Secretary of State ensure that clinical leaders are able to apply important techniques from other disciplines, such as lean production, which can drive up productivity?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Clinical leadership is important, but so is openness to the skills of other industries—particularly engineering skills, with which he is very familiar—that can help us to get processes right so that we improve care and safety for patients.
Dame Rosie Winterston (Doncaster Central) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that if the board of Doncaster and Bassetlaw Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust agrees to establish a teaching hospital today, that will enable the trust to train its doctors of tomorrow so that they are more able to move into clinical leadership roles as quickly as possible?

Mr Hunt: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question and welcome Doncaster hospital’s aspirations and ambitions. Any final decision will obviously be a matter for the NHS and Health Education England, but it is very encouraging that it is reaching for the stars in this way. Yes, we do need to train more doctors, and I hope that the hospital can make a good contribution.

Mr Speaker: The constituency of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) was just mentioned and he came in on cue. Unfortunately, he was not within the curtilage of the Chamber at the material time. No doubt we will hear from him at a later date, to which we look forward with eager anticipation.

Evidence-based Medicine

2. David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): What is his Department’s definition of evidence-based medicine; and if he will make a statement. [907973]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): Evidence-based medicine is about using high-quality research to guide clinical practice and to achieve optimal results for all patients. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence plays an important role in supporting evidence-based medicine by translating research into authoritative guidance for healthcare professionals on best practice.

David Tredinnick: Is the Minister aware that the author of “Evidence-based Medicine” in 1992, Professor David Sackett, said that it is “about integrating individual clinical experience and the best external evidence, not just internal evidence”? Is she further aware that in respect of the interpretation of evidence-based medicine, I have reported the so-called Good Thinking Society to the Charity Commission for the abuse of its charitable status through its use of legal threats to force the Department and health providers to change the law on healthcare?

Nicola Blackwood: NICE obviously considers complementary and alternative medicines when developing its guidance, where there is evidence, and it has been able to recommend some therapies, such as acupuncture for tension headaches and a range of complementary medicines for multiple sclerosis. We expect healthcare professionals to take that guidance into account when designing local services, but they must use their best understanding when treating the individual patients in front of them.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): The evidence is very clear that eating more sugar increases the risk of diabetes. Apart from introducing the sugar tax, what further evidence-based research can be used by the Government to reduce the risk of diabetes?

Nicola Blackwood: The right hon. Gentleman is a great proponent of tackling the risk of diabetes. He knows that the Government take tackling and preventing diabetes extremely seriously. That is why we have introduced the world’s first national diabetes prevention programme, which we have piloted and are rolling out across the country. It includes not only education programmes but testing, and we are making sure that we use the evidence from the programme to bring about improvement and that we are rolling it out effectively.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): We are all in favour of evidence-based medicine. We are also in favour of decent resources for the national health service but, in the case of Huddersfield and Calderdale hospitals, what we want is good, high-quality management, rather than GPs being promoted to a managerial position that they cannot handle.

Mr Speaker: In relation to evidence-based medicine.

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Gentleman is a great advocate of evidence-based medicine and I am pleased to hear about his support for it. He will be pleased that the national leadership programme is one of the evidence-based programmes that we are rolling out to improve the leadership of the NHS across the country.

Antimicrobial Resistance

3. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): How the Government plan to show global leadership in tackling antimicrobial resistance. [907974]

12. Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): How the Government plan to show global leadership in tackling antimicrobial resistance. [907983]

14. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): How the Government plan to show global leadership in tackling antimicrobial resistance. [907986]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): The UK is already a global leader in the fight against AMR. This Government’s leadership has secured a UN declaration on AMR and a commitment from the G20 to drive the development of new antimicrobials. We will continue to deliver international programmes to tackle AMR, including the Fleming fund and the Global AMR innovation fund, which represent more than £300 million of investment over the next five years.

Kevin Hollinrake: One of the 10 key recommendations of the O’Neill review was to improve the data and surveillance underlying antimicrobial resistance. What plans does the Minister have to routinely test all NHS patients for antibiotic resistance?

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is essential that we improve diagnostics if we are to tackle this national threat. A routine part of the clinical management of patients showing symptoms of infections is to take a blood sample. When an infection is identified, those samples are indeed tested for resistance. Part of our AMR strategy is to improve diagnostics and to fund innovation in this area.
Mrs Villiers: Will the Government commit themselves to ensuring that their strategy will include discouraging the use of intensive farming, given its overuse of antibiotics which contributes to antimicrobial-resistant problems?

Nicola Blackwood: I agree that we must focus on that as well, but we are currently focusing on reducing the need for antibiotics by minimising disease risk in animals through good animal husbandry and on-farm biosecurity. At present, antibiotics provide the only effective means of treatment for a number of animal diseases, and are therefore essential to ensuring the health and welfare of animals. However, we are also working on the matter in an international context with the World Organisation for Animal Health, and we will continue to drive forward the agenda.

Chris Green: What measures are the Government introducing to support the uptake of point-of-care C-reactive protein testing throughout the United Kingdom, given that it is a proven and cost-effective means of reducing levels of inappropriate antibiotic prescribing in primary care?

Nicola Blackwood: As my hon. Friend says, we must focus on innovation and better diagnostic tests, particularly bedside tests. The Government are actively reviewing evidence of the benefits of CRP tests. Pilot studies in the United Kingdom are contributing to that, and will be evaluated so that we can see how best to build on what can be shown to be working well.

Nicola Blackwood: I am grateful for that immediate sign.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): One of the 10 recommendations of the O’Neill review on antimicrobial resistance was for a massive global public awareness campaign. Given that 700,000 people die each year as a result of AMR, and given the review’s estimate that that figure will rise to 10 million a year by 2050, what assurances can the Minister give that she is behind that awareness campaign?

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Lady is right to identify the scale of the challenge, which is why we have put AMR on our national risk register, and she is also right to point out that no one country can tackle AMR alone. The United Kingdom has played a global leadership role. We co-sponsored the World Health Organisation’s 2015 global health plan and created the £265 million Fleming fund so that we could specifically help poor countries to tackle drug resistance, and we will continue to play that global leadership role.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The O’Neill report was published some six months ago and included recommendations for national Governments. What practical progress have the Government made so far?

Nicola Blackwood: On 19 September we published our comprehensive response to the report, which describes a range of actions that we will take on each of Lord O’Neill’s recommendations. The most practical progress that I can report is the fact that the prescribing of antibiotics has fallen for the first time since records began. I think that we can all be proud of that progress.

Leaving the EU: NHS Workforce

4. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK’s decision to leave the EU on the NHS workforce.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): There are currently 127,000 staff from the EU doing a vital job for patients in the NHS and social care system. In this year of Brexit, we salute their excellent work and remain confident that we will be able to negotiate for them to continue it in the future.

Gavin Newlands: There are more than 50,000 EU nationals working as nurses and doctors throughout the United Kingdom, along with 80,000 in the social care sector. The NHS already faces extensive rota gaps owing to a shortage of senior and junior doctors. Will the Secretary of State join our First Minister in demanding an unequivocal guarantee that EU nationals who are already living here will have the right to remain?

Mr Hunt: That is exactly what we intend to achieve through negotiations, but we must remember the British citizens, including people from Scotland, who are living in the EU and whose rights we also wish to protect. That is why the Prime Minister has made a big point of saying that she wishes to negotiate the issue at an early stage in order to give certainty to those people.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We are not going to leave the EU for two and a half years, but I want the Secretary of State to grip GP services in Lincolnshire now and to start training more doctors. The Pottergate surgery in Gainsborough is closing, potentially throwing hundreds of people out without a GP, and there is a shortage of 80 GPs against a target of 915 in Lincolnshire, and only six out of 30 training places were taken up recently. Will the Secretary of State now grasp the GP services in Lincolnshire for the sake of our people?

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has rather cheekily brushed aside the part of the question that does not suit his purposes. Only to focus on half a question is very cheeky; we will allow him to get away with it on this one occasion only.
Mr Hunt: I hope that I can reassure my hon. Friend about this because the reality is that we increased the number of GPs by 5% in the previous Parliament, and in this Parliament we are planning an increase of another 5,000, which will be the biggest increase in GPs in the history of the NHS, and will go along with considerable extra resources.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I will focus on the half of the question that the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) missed out. The other day I had a meeting with some constituents who told me that they were so pleased that we were leaving the European Union because it meant that the extra £350 million could be used to reopen the A&E department at Bishop Auckland. Has the Secretary of State found that £350 million yet?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady might have noticed that I personally did not talk very much about that £350 million. Whatever resources we have post-Brexit will have to be set in the overall economic context, but of course the great thing is that, post-Brexit, that will be a decision for this Parliament.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Many members of the NHS workforce across Bedford and Kempston come from the EU, but many others come from Caribbean countries, the Philippines, India and many countries in Africa. Will my right hon. Friend make sure that, in the future, people from those countries are given equal access to work in our NHS as that for EU nationals?

Mr Hunt: The benefit of Brexit will be that we can take precisely such decisions in this Parliament, because we will get back control of our borders. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning the very important work done by people from outside the EU in the NHS. Because I happened to meet the Philippines ambassador last week, I want to pay credit particularly to the Filipino workers in the NHS and the social care system, who do a fantastic job.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): May I start by extending my party’s sympathies to the victims of the Berlin attack?

Much of what we have heard today is about keeping those who are already here, but BMA Scotland has said that insecurity is stopping EU nationals from taking up posts that really need to be filled. This is an urgent problem, so does the Secretary of State agree that it is time to create some certainty for EU nationals and to avoid a self-made workforce crisis?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, which is why it is extremely frustrating that the current signals from the EU are that it is unwilling to bring forward negotiations about the status of EU nationals here, and indeed that of British nationals in the EU. No one from either side of the Brexit debate has ever said that there will be no immigration post-Brexit; they have simply said that we will control that immigration ourselves through this House and through decisions made by the British people at general elections.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On behalf of the official Opposition, may I echo the words of the Secretary of State in relation to the tragic events in Berlin and send our condolences to the people there?

The Institute for Employment Studies has today warned that Brexit could make nursing shortages even worse. That follows The Times reporting that “applications for nursing, midwifery and allied health courses were down by about 20%” and that in some institutions applications had halved. The decision to scrap nurse bursaries is having the consequences that every expert predicted it would. With the uncertainty of Brexit looming over our workforce, now is not the time to be taking a massive gamble with our nurses so, in the light of the evidence, will the Secretary of State now agree to scrap that disastrous policy?

Mr Hunt: I simply say to the hon. Gentleman that the purpose of that policy was to allow us to train more nurses; in fact, we will be training 40,000 more nurses during this Parliament. We have more than 11,000 more nurses in our NHS wards, and at Countess of Chester hospital—the hon. Gentleman’s own hospital—there are 172 more nurses than in 2010.

Hospitals in Special Measures

6. Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What progress he has made on improving hospitals in special measures.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): We want the NHS to offer the safest, highest quality care anywhere in the world, so we are now tackling unacceptable performance. That is in contrast to the Labour party, which ignored failures for so long. Since introducing the rigorous special measures inspection regime, 31 provider trusts have gone into Care Quality Commission special measures, of which 15 have been turned around as a result of significant quality improvements. I congratulate again the staff of Sherwood Forest, Wye Valley, Norfolk, and Suffolk trusts, all of which have come out of special measures in recent months.

Rehman Chishti: Medway Maritime Hospital has made significant improvements since it was put into special measures: mortality rates and length of patient stay are down; leadership is excellent; and there has been extensive investment in the A&E. Does the Minister agree that it is the right time for the hospital to come out of special measures? Will he join me in paying tribute to the excellent work of the hospital’s staff?

Mr Dunne: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his role in championing Medway Maritime Hospital, which I visited earlier this autumn. The CQC is in the process of re-inspecting Medway and will publish its findings in the new year. I congratulate the trust on its improvements thus far that were highlighted by my hon. Friend, which include reducing its average length of stay on admission wards from 11 days to only 3 days.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): A recent damning report on maternity care from the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust care referred to appalling neglect that lead to the avoidable deaths of mothers and babies. The trust has implemented an improvement plan, but plans for maternity services under the Making It Better scheme were based on a predicted birth rate of 3,500 a year, and the reality is that the trust deals with 10,000 deliveries a year. What action will the Minister take to address that situation?
Mr Dunne: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising some of the issues at the Pennine trust. We are well aware that it needs improvement, which is why we have buddied it up with the outstanding Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust next door. The Salford trust is led by Sir David Dalton and the Secretary of State referred to it earlier. I will take up the matter raised by the hon. Lady directly with Sir David.

Community Pharmacies

7. Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to work with community pharmacies to reduce (a) waste and (b) the cost of medicines.

David Mowat: My right hon. Friend is right; CCGs are variable in the extent to which they commission pharmacy services. However, we have set out the minor ailments scheme, it will be rolled out nationally by April 2018 and we expect every CCG to take a part in it.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group on pharmacy, I have seen many examples of drugs that have been prescribed and not used, as I am sure we all have. Should we not renegotiate the national contract, which currently pays community pharmacies more than 90% of their income through prescribing? Surely we can do things differently.

David Mowat: The right hon. Gentleman rightly says that we must change the contract to move away from 90% of the income coming from dispensing. Far more must come from services, which are separately commissioned by CCGs and others. The Murray review, which he will be aware of from his work on the all-party group, sets out a road map for that, and NHS England is determined to implement it.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): May I pay tribute to the excellent work of pharmacies in my constituency? Last night, “Look East” demonstrated the pressure that urgent care centres in the east are under because of extra patient footfall. Will the Minister give me an undertaking that he will put in place guidelines to CCGs to encourage them to work much more closely with pharmacies to reduce that footfall?

David Mowat: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and he is right to say that we must move the community pharmacy network away from just dispensing and into services, which will include minor ailments and repeat prescriptions. I will be encouraging CCGs to do that.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Community pharmacies, which were developed in Scotland 10 years ago, are there for minor ailment, chronic medication and public health services. Although the Minister has expressed admiration for the Scottish system, does he not recognise the need to work with the pharmacy profession to develop the full potential within community services?

David Mowat: I have mentioned on previous occasions that Scotland has, in some respects, gone further and faster than we have in England so far on community pharmacies. The £300 million that we have set aside in the integration fund for the rest of this Parliament is going to be used to do just the things that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, in terms of minor ailments and repeat prescriptions. We are determined to make that happen.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Over the festive period, in every town and city in the UK, community pharmacies will be open to dispense emergency prescriptions, and to provide specialist services and professional advice. Does the Minister appreciate that service, which not only helps the public, but takes pressure off other parts of the NHS? Will he join me in thanking community pharmacies and their staff for the work they do? Will he commit to reconsider budget cuts that will lead to a
reduction of this valuable service, and instead meet the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and the National Pharmacy Association to discuss extending the role of community pharmacies, to deliver savings for the NHS.

David Mowat: I have met the royal college of pharmacies on a number of occasions, and indeed it has worked with us on the Murray review, which is an essential road map that sets out how we are going to move the community pharmacy network away from a remuneration model based just on dispensing and on to services as well. I agree with the hon. Lady that the 11,000 community pharmacies across the country all provide excellent services, and we expect that to continue.

NHS Services: Winter

8. Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): What plans his Department has to help the NHS deal with pressures on services in winter 2016-17. [907979]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Last year, the number of excess winter deaths was 45% lower than in the previous year, and contingency planning for this winter is well under way, with £400 million allocated to local health systems for winter preparedness.

Conor McGinn: This time last year, St Helens CCG told me it needed to postpone elective operations and referrals in order to get through winter. Six months later, it was £12.5 million in deficit and proposing to cancel all non-urgent surgery indefinitely. What the Health Secretary is proposing does not make the problems go away—it stores them up. When will the Government give local trusts and clinicians the funding they require? Stop passing the buck and start passing the bucks!

Mr Hunt: With the greatest respect, I do not think it is passing the buck to put £1.3 billion more into the NHS this year than the hon. Gentleman was proposing at the last election. A lot of actions are being taken in Cheshire and Merseyside; a local accident and emergency delivery board was set up, which is doing very important work, and the emergency care improvement programme is working very well at his local trust.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): There is great pressure on emergency services throughout Staffordshire at the moment. There would be even more without the accident and emergency centres in Stafford and Burton, yet the sustainability and transformation plan proposes to reduce one of them, so there will only be two left in the county. Will the Secretary of State speak to the authors of the STP to make it clear that this is totally unacceptable given the current situation?

Mr Hunt: No one fights harder and more eloquently than my hon. Friend for the needs of the people of Stafford. I always look with concern at proposals to change emergency services given the huge pressures that exist, so I shall happily look at the plan as he suggests.

21. [907994] Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The problem is not just winter pressures but pressures all year round. The Secretary of State will no doubt tell me that the Government have now allowed councils to increase the precept to allow councils to fund it better, but the fact is that that is not enough money. There is no strategy. Does anyone outside the Department—those in the Department might not either—believe that the Government has a strategy for social care?

Mr Hunt: All I would do is urge the hon. Gentleman to listen to what the Prime Minister said at this Dispatch Box last week. She said that we recognise the short-term pressures—indeed, the Communities Secretary came up with a package of £900 million extra over the next couple of years—but that we also need a long-term sustainable solution, on which the Government are working hard.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the pressures of winter that needs improving is inappropriate admissions to A&E? Does he accept that the proposals by the Essex success regime to ensure that the three hospitals concerned will retain their A&E departments but that there will be a specialist centre for cardiothoracic care and for burns and plastic surgery care are the right way forward to improve and enhance the care for those suffering from accidents and emergencies?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend understands these matters extremely well from his time as a very distinguished Health Minister. He is absolutely right; the truth is that we want widespread availability of A&Es but we do not serve patients best by offering identical services everywhere. That is why in the past three or four years one of the things we are most proud of is the setting up of a national network of 26 trauma centres, which has had a dramatic impact on mortality rates for the most serious cases.

Mr Speaker: I have just been advised by a very sagacious source that in supplementary questions and answers to this question some reference to winter is desirable.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): I associate myself with the Secretary of State's remarks about Berlin. I wish everyone in the House a merry Christmas and I extend my best wishes for a very peaceful and joyful Christmas and new year to all NHS staff, especially those working over Christmas.

Pressures on the NHS this winter are such and the underfunding is so severe that hospitals have been ordered to close operating theatres for elective surgery over Christmas. Is this what the Secretary of State means by a seven-day NHS?

Mr Hunt: Let me wish the shadow Health Secretary a merry Christmas and say that despite his rhetoric I see that Santa has been quite generous to him. His local trust in Leicester has 254 more nurses and 306 more doctors than in 2010. Next year, we will have a new £43 million emergency floor at the Leicester royal infirmary. We need to ensure that there is sufficient bed capacity in our hospitals over winter—that is a very important part of winter planning—but we are also doing 5,000 more elective operations every day than when Labour was in office.

Jonathan Ashworth: I am delighted that the Secretary of State has done his research on Leicester, but is closing operating theatres for a month this Christmas
Mr Dunne: I am always grateful for advice from the Public Accounts Committee, which looks into areas where the Government can recover moneys to which they are entitled. There was an article in today’s *Times* which referred to outstanding sums, and we are taking steps to try to increase recovery rates in the years ahead.

**Sustainability and Transformation Plan: South-west London**

10. **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What assessment has he made of the potential effect of the implementation of the sustainability and transformation plan for south-west London on the provision of health services in that area. [907981]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): The sustainability and transformation plan for south-west London sets out how the area will implement the NHS’s five year forward view. The local NHS is looking to strengthen primary care and ensure closer working across NHS bodies, with more sustainable acute services, developing centres of expertise to ensure high-quality service, as well as closer co-ordination with social care providers.

**Tom Brake:** The Epsom and St Helier Trust is a high-performing trust, hitting A&E and cancer treatment referral targets. It is confident that it can deliver sustainable and transformed care services, but will struggle to do so in St Helier hospital, built in the 1930s. The trust has previously secured a commitment from two Governments that funding would be available. Will the Minister give the same undertaking and confirm that once the STP process is complete, funding will be available to the trust to enable it to continue delivering excellent sustainable services from a new hospital?

**Mr Dunne:** I am aware of the right hon. Gentleman’s campaign on this matter. It would be wrong for me to pre-empt the work that is being done in reviewing both the STP process and the policy priorities of NHS England. Once those plans have been put forward to Ministers, we will be able to consider which we can prioritise.

**Dr Tania Mathias** (Twickenham) (Con): The STP for south-west London includes mental health crisis needs, but there is a current crisis of lack of in-patient facilities for mental health patients. Will the Minister look into extra immediate funding to increase the number of in-patient mental health beds?

**Mr Dunne:** As my hon. Friend is well aware, given her experience in this area, mental health is a priority of the Government and of the STP process. I will take away what she says in relation to in-patient beds.

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Mr Hunt: May I gently urge the hon. Gentleman to be careful with his rhetoric? We are not closing operating theatres for a month over Christmas. We need to be very careful what we say in this place, because people outside are listening. The answer is to ensure that we increase capacity in the NHS, and that is why we have 11,000 more doctors and 11,000 more hospital nurses than we had six years ago. We are training 15,000 more doctors every year from 2018-19 to ensure that we can avoid these problems in the future.

**NHS: Financial Recovery**

9. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What progress the Government are making on recovering money from overseas visitors and other chargeable NHS patients. [907980]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): The NHS is a national, not an international, service. This Government were the first to introduce tough measures to clamp down on visitors accessing free NHS care, including introducing the immigration health surcharge. The steps we have taken have meant that income raised from visitors and migrants has risen threefold in three years, from £97 million in 2013-14 to £289 million in 2015-16.

**Andrew Bridgen:** I thank the Minister for that answer, but does he agree that recovering more money from chargeable patients requires a culture change among NHS staff? Does he therefore share my dismay that the leader of the doctors union dismisses the need even to address this issue, while calling for additional investment in our NHS?

**Mr Dunne:** I agree with my hon. Friend. That sick and vulnerable patients must not be put off seeking necessary or urgent treatment, but it makes sure that the NHS is fairly reimbursed by those who are not entitled to free care.

**Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As the Minister will know, the Public Accounts Committee has looked in detail at this issue, and we were rather shocked to discover that the Government themselves are woeful at collecting money from EU citizens who use our hospitals and for whom the Government are then responsible for getting the money from their home Government. When will the Government get their act together to make sure that this money comes into our NHS?
NHS England to determine the selection criteria for the future procurement of services provided by it. My focus right now is on raising the quality of the existing contract, and I have been clear that the standard of Capita’s work under the contract has not been acceptable and it must improve. I continue to meet regularly with Capita and NHS England as they work to improve the performance of the service.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the Minister for that response. Several GP practices in my constituency have reported serious delays in the transfer of medical records. In some cases the records have gone missing altogether, with serious implications for patient safety. I would like a clear response from the Minister about the assurances she can give to my constituents that the Government—not just NHS England, but the Government—take seriously the safe delivery of their confidential medical records.

Nicola Blackwood: I take this issue extremely seriously, which is why I am personally meeting NHS England and Capita fortnightly and ensuring that detailed rectification plans are in place for each service delivery programme. The improvements should happen between January and April next year. I shall be happy to write to the hon. Lady in more detail if she would like to be able to reassure her GPs, optometrists and dentists on those issues.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. This question is about England, rather than Scotland or Wales.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Minister advise GP practices in my constituency, who have been massively inconvenienced by the chaos of the Capita contract, that full compensation will be available for the inconvenience they have been put through?

Nicola Blackwood: At the moment, NHS England and Capita are focusing very hard on improving service delivery, which I think must be the top priority, but we are also looking into exactly what inconvenience and costs GPs have suffered, along with dentists and optometrists, and that will be considered and discussed with GPs.

Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust: Delayed Discharges

13. Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): How many patient days of delayed discharge attributable to the levels of suitable social care available at the Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust there were in (a) 2010 and (b) 2016.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): Directly comparable figures are not available, but it is clear that in the past two years there has been a substantial increase in delayed discharge figures attributable to social care at the trust, which this year were among the worst currently being recorded across the NHS.

Rob Marris: Sadly, those figures are no surprise, despite the well-managed New Cross hospital, because central Government have cut Wolverhampton City Council’s total income by almost 50% in the past six years. The primary care vertical integration pilot in Wolverhampton is a redesign of services so that a single organisation—the hospital trust-deals with patients from initial contact to ongoing management and end-of-life care. What steps is the Department of Health taking to support vertical integration as one potential way to improve care and lessen hospital admissions and delayed discharges?

David Mowat: The hon. Gentleman is right that budgets are part of the issue, which is why last week’s announcement about increased funding is important. However, funding alone does not explain the delayed transfers in Wolverhampton, which are five times worse than those of Telford, which is just down the road; twice as bad as Sandwell, which is very close; and, indeed, 30 times worse than the best performing councils, such as Newcastle, Knowsley and St Helens. With regard to his specific point about the vertically integrated pilot, this is a very exciting project and I commend the people of Wolverhampton for doing it. It is based on a model from Spain that has produced big results. We are watching it carefully and will support it as required.

Unhealthy Food

15. Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): What assessment he has made of the potential effectiveness of introducing (a) a ban on price-cutting promotions on unhealthy food in supermarkets and (b) restrictions on advertising of unhealthy food during family television programmes in reducing childhood obesity.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): In developing the childhood obesity plan, we considered the latest research and evidence on promotions and advertising, including Public Health England’s evidence package “Sugar reduction: the evidence for action”. We have made no secret of the fact that we considered a range of policies before finally settling on those set out in the childhood obesity plan. The plan includes the soft drinks industry levy and taking 20% of sugar out of certain products. We concluded that our plan is the right approach to secure the future health of our children.

Natalie McGarry: I associate myself with the Secretary of State’s words of sympathy for the people of Berlin, and I also add my thoughts for the people of Aleppo, Yemen, Gaza, Mosul and all the forgotten conflicts of the world.

Public health experts have dismissed the Government’s obesity strategy as a weak approach and a wasted opportunity. The Government say that they are committed to evidence-based policy making, but they have failed to acknowledge that relying on voluntary food action without tackling cost and availability is inherently flawed. Will the Minister commit the Government to getting a grip and bringing forward a ban or restrictions on advertising and price-cutting promotions on junk food?

Nicola Blackwood: I am happy to reassure the hon. Lady that current restrictions on advertising in the UK are already among the toughest in the world. For example, there is a total ban on the advertising of less healthy food during children’s television programmes. Those
have been shown to be very effective. However, we also welcome action that has been taken by forward-thinking retailers on promotions elsewhere. In particular, Sainsbury's has committed to removing multi-buy promotions across its full range of branded and own-brand soft drinks, confectionery, biscuits and crisps, removing more than 50% of its multi-buy promotions from its grocery business while lowering regular prices for products. It should be congratulated on leading the way.

Mr Speaker: We now feel considerably better informed.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Advertising agencies and industry bodies can play a key role in ensuring that adverts are appropriate. Will the Minister continue working with the industry to tackle child obesity?

Nicola Blackwood: Yes.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Certain supermarkets persist in placing less healthy foods on promotion near the entrances to their stores, where they are unavoidable. Does the Minister agree that it is not just at checkouts that healthy options should be promoted, and that retailers should exercise more responsibility?

Nicola Blackwood: I absolutely agree that putting healthier options near checkouts and helping people to make healthier choices are part of retailers' responsibilities. What has been notable in my discussions with retailers is that the penny is starting to drop that this is the direction of travel and what the public want, and I think we are going to start seeing a real sea change in the way retailers are advertising.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Let us hear the sound of Shipley—Mr Philip Davies.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I urge the Minister not to go down this ridiculous nanny-state route—which one would not expect from a Conservative Government—of setting up an unhealthy food police to go round telling people what they should be eating and what they should not be eating? No food eaten as part of a balanced diet is in itself particularly unhealthy. If the Government are so concerned about families that are just about managing, why on earth would they even contemplate increasing costs for working families?

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend flatters me by saying he thinks I am a nanny—it is really quite a disturbing thought. However, what we have here is an obesity plan that balances the need to cut the sugar in young people's diets, as a way to make sure they get a healthy diet, and individual choice, which we know is absolutely a Conservative ideal.

**Topical Questions**

T2. [907963] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): As we enter the challenging winter period, I want, on behalf of the whole country, to thank the 2.7 million people working in the health and care system—particularly those giving up all or part of their own Christmas day to look after patients. We are in their debt, and we wish them a merry Christmas, whenever they get the chance to celebrate it with their families.

Chris Green: Bolton A&E is employing new measures to cope with the staggering demand on its service. What are the Government doing to educate people that A&E is for serious and life-threatening conditions only, so that staff and resources can go where they are needed most?

Mr Hunt: That is an excellent question. We are doing a number of things. First, we have the Stay Well this Winter campaign, which has a lot of advice to go out to his constituents and all our constituents about how to avoid things that can lead to their having to go to A&E. However, we also urge the public to remember that accident and emergency departments are for precisely that.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): There was no new money from the Government for social care in the local government settlement—just a recycling of money from the new homes bonus to social care, and that is for 2017-18 only. Fifty-seven councils will actually lose funding owing to this recycling. Salford, which was recently praised by the Prime Minister for its integration of social care, will lose £2.3 million due to this inept settlement. Is it not time for the Secretary of State to accept that social care is in crisis and that his Government cannot just dump the issue of funding it on councils and council tax payers?

Mr Hunt: I do listen carefully to what the hon. Lady says, because she has campaigned long and hard for social care. However, with respect, I would say to her that she is ignoring one simple fact: there is more money going into social care now than would have been the case if we had followed her advice at the last election. What the Communities Secretary announced was £900 million of additional help over the next two years.

Barbara Keeley: The Government’s plans for funding social care look inept because they have tied care funding, which is related to need, to council tax and to deductions for the new homes bonus. Last week’s settlement was a pathetic attempt to deal with a funding gap of £2 billion for social care by recycling £240 million within budgets. The chief executive of the British Red Cross has described the social care crisis as “a humanitarian crisis that needs urgent action.” When is the Secretary of State going to take that crisis seriously?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady talks about council tax, but she does not call out Labour councils like Hillingdon, Hounslow, Merton and Stoke which complain about pressures in the social care system and then refuse to introduce the social care precept that could make a difference to their residents. We are taking the situation seriously. More was done this week and more will be done in future.

T7. [907969] Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): As my hon. Friend is aware, last week the Murray report was published. When is he likely to consider it, and when will he make a statement?
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): I thank my hon. Friend for that question and commend him for his work as a pharmacy champion. The Murray review was indeed published last week, and NHS England will respond to it in detail early in the new year. It is a very important document because it sets out in some detail how we intend to transform the community pharmacy network into a service-based profession along the lines that my hon. Friend likes.

Mr Jeremy Hunt: First, I absolutely commend the hon. Gentleman for standing with his constituents and championing individual cases. I will happily look into the proposed changes and how they will affect people like Zac. I assure the hon. Gentleman that when we make these changes it is to improve the services of people and his constituents; that is why we are making them.

Mr Speaker: Alex Chalk. Where is the fella?

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): Despite some of the obvious challenges in the healthcare service, this is a wonderful time of year when hundreds of thousands of people choose to quit smoking by putting down their cancer stick and picking up an electronic vaping device. Does the Minister share my concern, however, that we must be very cautious in any implementation of the EU tobacco products directive so that it does not act as a barrier to people quitting smoking and taking up vaping?

Nicola Blackwood: The Government are very clear that vaping is significantly less harmful than continuing to smoke. Under the current regulatory regime, huge numbers of smokers are successfully using these innovative products as an effective quitting tool. We have already committed to reviewing the TPD and we will fully explore the opportunities that Brexit may provide, but until exit negotiations are concluded we remain a full member of the EU.

Nicola Blackwood: I absolutely cannot confirm that. The tendering process has not even begun. Therefore, we are not considering any form of company, private or otherwise.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The Health Committee has just published its interim report on preventing suicide. I thank all those who gave evidence to our inquiry and all members of the Department of Health advisory group. We support the strategy, but the clear message that we heard was that implementation needs to be strengthened. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss our report’s recommendations, and will he join me in thanking members of the Samaritans and other voluntary groups around the country who will be working tirelessly over Christmas, as they do every day, to support those in crisis?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend speaks wisely. Christmas can be a very lonely time for a number of people, so we all commend the work of voluntary organisations that do so well. I would be delighted to meet her.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): More than a third of my male constituents live until they are over 80, and yet next door in Windsor and Maidenhead the same is true of well over half of the residents. In the 10 years before 2010, that gap narrowed. What is the Secretary of State doing to narrow the gap in future?
Mr Hunt: The best thing we can do to narrow the gap is make sure that we continue to invest properly in the NHS and social care system, and make good progress on public health, which often has the biggest effect on health inequalities. That is why it is good news that we have record low smoking rates.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): With acute hospital bed blocking at a record high, do Ministers agree that it is a great pity that so very few of the 40 sustainability and transformation plans now in the public domain deal directly with step-down care and, in particular, with community hospitals?

Mr Dunne: As my hon. Friend has confirmed, 44 areas are working on their STPs, all of which are charged with looking at improving integration between hospitals and social care in order to improve discharge. In order for STPs to be taken forward, they have to address that issue.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Recent figures from the Royal College of Psychiatrists show that children and adolescent mental health services are still underfunded in many parts of the country—particularly worrying for me is the fact that Bristol seems to be the 13th lowest in the country. What are Ministers doing to ensure that children across England and the rest of the UK get the health services that they need?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Lady is right to highlight this issue and I agree with her. I am not happy with the service that we provide through CAMHS at the moment. It is a big area of focus for the Government. We are putting a lot of investment in, but there is lots more to be done.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My constituency has been waiting some time for the go-ahead for a new critical treatment hospital providing 24/7 care for the sickest patients, which is very much in line with Government policy. The hospital’s chief executive, Mary Edwards, retires this month after 21 years of exceptional service. Will the Secretary of State give her a retirement present and help me to secure a decision from NHS England?

Mr Dunne: I join my right hon. Friend in congratulating her chief executive on her commitment to the NHS. As I said in answer to a previous question about the STP for my right hon. Friend’s area, the issue is being reviewed at the moment by NHS England, and I am afraid that I am not in a position to give her any advance notice of the outcome.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The Secretary of State will be aware of the horrifying case of Fiona Hollings, a 19-year-old with anorexia who for the past four months has been nearly 400 miles away from home, in a bed in Glasgow. Her family have travelled 8,000 miles in that time to see her. The Government commit to ending this horrific practice by 2020, but do families really have to put up with it until then? How would he feel if it was his child?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: We are taking action and I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that what has happened in that case is completely unacceptable. We are currently commissioning a record number of in-patient mental health beds, and it is a very big priority for us to eliminate the problem entirely by the end of the Parliament.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): My constituent Marie Bingham administers a drug at home using pre-filled syringes, but she is unable to dispose of the used needles, partly because they are in 2.5 litre sharps tubs rather than 1 litre sharps tubs. It is a ludicrous situation. Is the Minister aware of the problem, and are there any steps he can take to deal with it?

David Mowat: As my hon. Friend says, pharmacies are commissioned, on such occasions, to dispose of these needles. I was not aware of the particular issue about the 2.5 litre tubs that seems to exist in Rugby. I will investigate that and revert to him.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): TB rates are currently higher in bits of Ealing than in Rwanda. Could the Government better the bilateral innovation fund to which they have committed with China and go for the O’Neill report recommendation to work towards a truly global fund, in conjunction with other nations, to fight antimicrobial resistance?

Nicola Blackwood: As I have already answered, we are a world leader on AMR. We have not only the bilateral fund with China but the £265 million Fleming fund, through which we will deliver bilateral national action plans with a number of developing nations. We are committed to going further than that through the global action plan with the UN.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): A fortnight ago, I visited the pharmacy at the Corby urgent care centre to thank the dedicated staff for all that they do all year round, and to have a flu jab as part of the ongoing campaign. Does the Minister agree that exactly that sort of proactive working is crucial in trying to tackle winter pressures?

David Mowat: I do agree with my hon. Friend. I am particularly pleased that this year, the pharmacy network has done more flu jabs so far than in the entire period last year. I had my flu jab, and it is holding up well.

Mr Speaker: It is always useful to have a bit of additional information. We are greatly indebted to the Minister.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): In the east midlands, the average ambulance arrival time for life-threatening cases has almost doubled in the last three years, and Nottingham’s A&E waiting times are the worst in a decade. Will Ministers apologise to my constituents, including hard-working NHS staff, for their failure to fund health and social care adequately?

Mr Dunne: I would like to add my tribute to the work of ambulance staff up and down the country, particularly over the busy Christmas period ahead. As I have already said today, we have increased funding for ambulance services. We have increased the number of paramedics, both in training and employed. Earlier this month we announced that we had increased the payments to
paramedics to move them from band 5 to band 6, to help to retain and recruit more staff.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are short of time, but I am in a generous mood. We can manage only one more, so

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O oral Answers

Mr Speaker: Order. We are short of time, but I am in a generous mood. We can manage only one more, so

46 years, six months and two days after his first election to the House, I call Mr Dennis Skinner.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): He is a mine of information, isn’t he? He would like to contribute, really.

Does the Secretary of State not think that it is a scandal to be shutting Bolsover hospital, with 16 valuable beds that will go for ever, at a time when people are lined up on trolleys in nearly every hospital in Britain? Why does the Secretary of State not give Bolsover a Christmas present and announce that Bolsover hospital will be saved? Come on!

Mr Jeremy Hunt: I add my congratulations to those of the Speaker on the hon. Gentleman’s long service, which has included campaigning for Bolsover hospital. I simply say to him that we will look very carefully at all proposals to change the services offered. I think community hospitals have an important role in the future of the NHS, but the services they provide will change as more people want to be treated at home.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.
Sky: 21st Century Fox Takeover Bid

12.38 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to make a statement on the timetable of, and the approach of the Government to, 21st Century Fox’s bid to take over Sky now that the bid has been agreed, and whether the Government plan to refer the bid to the competition authorities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): As hon. and right hon. Members know, Sky plc announced on Friday 9 December that it had received an approach from 21st Century Fox Inc. to acquire the 61% of shares in Sky plc that it does not already own. The Minister for Digital and Culture, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), made a statement on 12 December about the proposed bid and the process that would need to be followed. I recognise that this is an issue of significant interest to the public and that it has raised a lot of interest in Parliament, as well as being a significant issue for the parties concerned. It is very important I make it clear that the role I will play in this process is a quasi-judicial one. As the Secretary of State, I am able to intervene in certain media mergers on public interest grounds, as set out in the Enterprise Act 2002. Government guidance on the operation of the public interest merger provisions under the Act gives an indication of how the intervention regime will operate in practice and of the approach I will aim to take. The most important concern for me is that the integrity of the process is upheld. The guidance makes it clear that I will aim to take an initial decision on whether to intervene on public interest grounds within 10 working days of formal notification of the merger to the relevant competition authority.

No such formal notification has yet been made. Unless and until a formal notification is made to the relevant competition authority, I will not be taking any decisions in relation to the bid. It is for the parties formally to notify the relevant competition authorities. It is at that point that I will need to consider whether any of the public interests specified in the legislation merit an intervention. My decision on whether or not to intervene will be a quasi-judicial one, and it is important that I am able to act independently and that the process is scrupulously fair and impartial. Given that, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further on this proposed bid at this point if the integrity of the process is to be protected and everyone’s interests are to be treated fairly.

What I can say is that I understand the significant public and parliamentary interest in this matter, and I do not for a minute underestimate it. This is also clearly a significant issue for the parties to the bid. It is therefore crucial that the integrity of the process is protected. I will not be making any further comment on the process or the merits of the bid today, but I can confirm that this matter is being treated with the utmost seriousness and that, should the parties formally notify the bid to the relevant competition authorities, I will act in line with the relevant legislation, the guidance and the quasi-judicial principles.

Edward Miliband: I thank the Secretary of State for her reply. The urgency of the House considering this matter today is that we are going into recess until 9 January, and the bid may be notified to the Government at any time.

It is very important that the House understands the reality that in even launching this bid for 100% of Sky, the Murdochs are seeking to turn the judgment of this House, the regulator and indeed the country on its head. In 2011, this House unanimously urged the withdrawal of the bid for Sky by Rupert Murdoch. In 2012, Ofcom published a damning assessment of James Murdoch’s behaviour in the running of News International. That report stopped short of declaring Sky as unfit and improper to hold a licence only on the basis that the Murdochs were a minority—not 100%—owner of Sky, and that James Murdoch was no longer playing an executive role at Sky.

Today James Murdoch is back, as chairman of Sky and chief executive of 21st Century Fox. This bid shows the Murdochs have learned nothing and think they can get away with anything. If it was wrong for the Murdochs to own 100% of Sky in 2011 and 2012, it is wrong today. We have seen the convictions of their senior employees for phone hacking and perverting the course of justice, and of police and public officials for taking payments from News International employees. We are still yet to have part 2 of Leveson, which was supposed—I am quoting its terms of reference—to examine the “corporate governance and management failures at News International”.

Why? Because this Government are seeking to ditch part 2 of Leveson. We all said across this House in 2011 that never again would we allow the Murdochs to wield unfettered power, yet here we are all over again.

May I ask the Secretary of State: first, has she read the Ofcom report of 2012 into James Murdoch, and will she tell us what she thought of its contents; secondly, will she tell us how this bid can even be considered to be in the realm of reality when part 2 of Leveson, specifically tasked with looking at the failures of News International, has not taken place; and thirdly, will she hear the message loud and clear that if the House were to return on 9 January to find the waving through of this bid, that would be totally and utterly unacceptable and fly in the face of the expressed will of the House and the country? Will she assure us today that this will not happen?

On the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister said she would stand up to the powerful. If ever there was a chance to prove it, it is today.

Karen Bradley: I do not for one second underestimate the huge public and parliamentary interest in this proposed merger, nor the importance of the issue to the parties concerned. But I must ensure, given my quasi-judicial role, that I protect the integrity of the process and ensure that, as and when a formal notification is given—if it is—it is properly considered. I will be making no further comments on the merits of the bid at this stage.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend bear in mind that, contrary to the assertion of the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) in The Guardian, Sky’s share of the television news market is actually 5%, not 20%? Although there may well be a case for asking the regulator to look at
this bid, does she recognise that it represents a £12 billion investment into a British company, and is a vote of confidence that Britain will remain a centre of international broadcasting after it leaves the European Union?

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend has significant interest in this area, having been an exceptionally good predecessor for me, but will, I know, understand the position I am in and that I cannot comment.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): We have seen this bid before. I know that Christmas is a time for TV repeats, but this one was not a hit the first time round and is no more popular now. More than 135,000 people have already signed an online petition calling for the bid to be referred to Ofcom. The reasons for their concern are the same as those that caused the previous bid to be abandoned in 2011. Does the Secretary of State agree that it would be outrageous if the bid were pushed through over the Christmas holidays when Parliament is not sitting? Is she not even slightly embarrassed that on the one hand she is currently consulting to shelve part 2 of the Leveson inquiry, which would look at unlawful or improper conduct and management failings in parts of the Murdoch empire, and on the other is being asked to rule on whether that empire should be expanded?

Last week, the Minister for Digital and Culture told the House categorically that the Prime Minister had not discussed the bid at her recent New York meeting with Rupert Murdoch. Will the Secretary of State repeat that assurance? How does she know? Will she tell us what was discussed, because after all, Leveson recommended that those meetings be minuted?

Yesterday Rupert Murdoch wrote to The Guardian to say:

“"I have made it a principle all my life never to ask for anything from any prime minister."

Let us just pause to take that in for a moment. Members will recall John Major’s testimony to the Leveson inquiry, in which he recalled Rupert Murdoch asking him to change his party’s policy on Europe and warning that if the Conservatives would not change their European policies, “his papers could not and would not support the Conservative Government.”

Does the Secretary of State believe Rupert Murdoch or the former Conservative Prime Minister, and what implication does the contradiction between them have for the application of the fit and proper person test?

Karen Bradley: I repeat that I cannot comment on the merits of the bid. I can say that, as and when a formal notification is made, there will be 10 days for me to make a decision as to whether to refer the proposed merger.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the Leveson process. I remind him that we have opened an open public consultation on that, which I hope he has responded to—I am sure he has. At the end of the consultation I will look at the responses as a separate matter.

The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about the meeting the Prime Minister held in September. She had a pre-arranged meeting with Wall Street Journal editors. Mr Murdoch dropped in to that meeting. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the proposed takeover was not discussed.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I am not entirely sure that a company controlled by Rupert Murdoch trying to buy another company largely controlled by Rupert Murdoch is of the great public interest that the Secretary of State seems to think it is. This is really all about the Labour party not liking Rupert Murdoch. If Richard Branson was in the same situation Opposition Members would not be saying a word about it. So may I ask the Secretary of State to ignore the siren voices on the Opposition Benches and not treat it with the great importance with which they think it should be treated? After all, the BBC controls huge amounts of TV news and national and local radio news, and we do not hear a peep out of the Opposition about that.

Karen Bradley: I know that my hon. Friend has strong views on these matters. I just repeat that I will not be making any comments on the merits or otherwise of the bid.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): When these matters were last discussed, the Minister of State said that the plurality rules were clearly set out and the Secretary of State would follow them very carefully if she was required to make a determination. Now that the bid has been agreed—although no formal notification has been given—can the Secretary of State throw some light on the process? Does the separation of the Murdoch print and broadcast interests change the Government’s view of plurality since the last bid? How much weight will the Secretary of State give to that separation when considering whether a public interest intervention notice should be issued?

Karen Bradley: No formal notification has been made. At this stage I will be making no comment on the merits or otherwise of the bid.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I note a hereditary interest in relation to the forces of the great Rupert Murdoch and commend my right hon. Friend for her proper even-handedness in dealing with this matter and her correct responses. May I also note that we have seen the true voice of socialist envy that, thanks to Rupert Murdoch, who risked his whole business on it in about 1990, Sky has provided incredible choice to millions of people. It is amazingly popular. Instead of decrying this wonderful achievement, we should be proud that it happened in Britain and that this huge investment is potentially coming into our nation. I hope that my right hon. Friend will bear that in mind and will not fall tempted by the siren voices of socialist ingrates.

Karen Bradley: I note my hon. Friend’s comments, but I repeat that I will not be making any comments on the merits or otherwise of the bid.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Secretary of State is quite properly saying that she will not comment on the decision itself, but that does not mean that she
cannot answer some of the questions that are being put to her today, and she should not hide behind that. So I ask her again: has she read the 2012 Ofcom report on the conduct of James Murdoch—yes or no?

Karen Bradley: I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Lady, but I will not be making any comments on the process, its merits or otherwise.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Minister is at pains to tell us what she cannot do, and we respect that of course, but can she give us an assurance that she will use her office to ensure that there is a proper plurality of ownership of the media in this country, and that the views of this House, which have been clearly and frequently expressed, will also be respected at the end of this process?

Karen Bradley: I fully appreciate the level of interest in the matter. I am sure that the House will continue to debate these issues, and it is absolutely right that it should do so. It is equally important, as the right hon. Gentleman says, that I discharge my functions in line with the legislation and in accordance with my quasi-judicial role.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Is it not likely that Mr Murdoch had a point when he said—he was quoted earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) from the Front Bench—that he had never asked “for anything from any prime minister”?

Why should he? A Tory Government know what he wants and usually give it to him without any difficulty whatever.

Karen Bradley: It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the relationships that Prime Ministers of all parties over the years have had with members of the press.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Secretary of State has made it very clear that she does not feel able to comment on the content of this decision because it is a quasi-judicial decision, but does she share my anxiety that the timing is all in the hands of Murdoch? She has a responsibility to respond within 10 days. It might not be an accident that he has chosen not to notify the bid at the moment, in order to ensure that Parliament cannot take a decision before she has to. What is she going to do about that, now or in future?

Karen Bradley: At the moment there is no decision to take. This is a decision that will be taken by me as the Secretary of State. I reassure the right hon. Lady that I will not be taking a break over Christmas, whether there is a formal notification or otherwise.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) could not have struck a more wrong note with his remarks. No one on the Opposition Benches feels any envy for the Dowler family or any of the other victims of phone hacking. The Secretary of State cannot tell us what she is going to do, but the findings of Leveson part 2 may be relevant to the fit and proper person test. When she came to the House and announced that she intended to consult on it rather than just go ahead straightforwardly, did she have any inkling that this takeover bid was going to be made?

Karen Bradley: The first I knew about the takeover bid was at the same time as everyone else in the House, when it was announced in the press.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Given the concerns that have been raised about the timing, and the fact that it could well be that the Secretary of State will have to fulfil her quasi-judicial role during the recess, if she could not answer questions about what she has previously read today, will she ensure that when she does take a decision, on which she will be questioned in the House, she will be able to answer that she did read all of that relevant material? On understanding the parliamentary and public interest, does she accept that most of it goes to those points that are in the public interest grounds in the legislation?

Karen Bradley: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I will fulfil my role exactly in line with the legislation and I will of course be answerable to Parliament in the decisions that I take.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I know that it is pointless to ask the Culture Secretary to give a view on the bid, but may I express to her the clear views about the bid of more than 100 constituents who have emailed me in recent days? Will she undertake to come back to the House on 9 January to give us an update?

Karen Bradley: I hear the hon. Lady’s comments about her constituents’ concerns. I will of course update the House as and when there is anything to say on the matter.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): When the original bid was abandoned in 2011, the former Prime Minister said that it was the right thing to do for the country. Does the Secretary of State disagree with him and think that the time is now right? If not, will she please refer it to Ofcom?

Karen Bradley: My apologies, but I cannot answer that question at this stage. I have a quasi-judicial role in this process; I know that the hon. Lady has a legal background and will understand that. I simply cannot make comments at this stage.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I know that this question will not be answered, but I am asking it just the same. A substantial number of my constituents have contacted me in the past week about the bid, and they are all of the same opinion—that Mr Murdoch has too much influence over our media. Many would like to see his bid referred to Ofcom for that very reason. However, does the Minister agree that at the very least, any takeover should be delayed until the Leveson part 2 inquiry takes place?

Karen Bradley: I apologise again, but I cannot make comments on the merits of the bid or the process.
Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): With reference to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) about the former Prime Minister David Cameron’s comment that the withdrawal of the decision was the right one, what assessment has the Secretary of State made about what might have changed between then and now?

Karen Bradley: I will be making no comments on any assessments that I have made at any time. I will be going through a full process in line with the legislation. I need to ensure the integrity of that process for all concerned.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): We are all concerned that next year the leader of the free world will be a blunt-brained snake oil salesman who was elected by a prostituted press to whom truth is secondary and sometimes entirely irrelevant. Will the Secretary of State bear in mind the very strong views that we need to maintain in this country those qualities of balance and fairness that we have imposed on the BBC by statute? Will she bear in mind the grave danger of a prostituted press?

Karen Bradley: I do not think anyone is in doubt about the hon. Gentleman’s views.

Christian Matheson: We are about yours.

Mr Speaker: We are grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his sedentary chunter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree that allowing the takeover might put pressure on, or take away, the diversity of our press? Is it the Government’s or the Secretary of State’s intention to ensure that we have a free press, not controlled by one person or one company?

Karen Bradley: I have a very specific role, which is set out in legislation. I will fulfil that role with the utmost integrity.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents have also contacted me with their concerns about the bid, in particular the threat to the valued diversity of our press. Will the Secretary of State commit to addressing this point when she comes back to the House in the first week after the recess? Will she also confirm that if she has not yet read the 2012 Ofcom report on the conduct of James Murdoch she will have done so by the time we come back, and refer to its conclusions in her response?

Karen Bradley: I can assure the House that I will update the House as and when decisions are taken. I do understand that there is the utmost interest in this matter, but I have a quasi-judicial role and I cannot make any further comment at this stage.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I very gently say to the hon. Gentleman that I do not think the House requires the full details of the statement that he is clearly very keen to share with us? The matter to which he alludes is certainly important, but it did not require rehearsal in the Chamber today. That is why it is not being aired today in the way that, for example, another matter has been aired very fully.

I say to the hon. Gentleman that various vehicles are open to him to pursue the issue. Knowing him as I do, I
feel certain that he possesses the ingenuity to use one or other of those vehicles. I shall be looking with great interest to see how he does so, after he has had a brief break over the Christmas period.

Ms Eagle: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Many of us who have been Ministers know only too well that quasi-judicial processes have to be very carefully handled in this Chamber, but I wonder whether you could assist us. We had a statement from the Secretary of State on the Sky bid, but she refused to answer a range of other questions, such as whether she had read a 2012 Ofcom report that is published and in the public domain. Surely she refused to answer that question not because she was in a quasi-judicial process, but simply because she did not want to tell us whether she had read it or not.

Mr Speaker: I would not want to impute any particular motive to any Member of the House, including the Secretary of State. What I would say to the hon. Lady is that I understand her irritation—I was going to say “frustration”—on this matter. The Secretary of State has interpreted her responsibility, in the way she described it, as being to articulate her case. I feel sure she possesses the ingenuity to use one or other of those vehicles. I shall be looking with great interest to see how he does so, after he has had a brief break over the Christmas period.

HOUSE OF LORDS (EXCLUSION OF HEREDITARY PEERS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr David Hanson presented a Bill to amend the House of Lords Act 1999 to remove the by-election system for the election of hereditary peers; to provide for the exclusion of hereditary peers from the House of Lords over time; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read the Second time Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 116).

Rail Ombudsman

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

Mr Speaker: We now come to the ten-minute rule motion. I say that with a degree of interest, because it means that the hon. Gentleman has up to 10 minutes only in which to articulate his case. I feel sure he will do so with an eloquence worthy of Demosthenes.

1.8 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a Rail Ombudsman to scrutinise performance and complaints and represent the interests of passengers; to make provision for the Ombudsman to levy fines on train operating companies for late running and cancellation of trains and about the use of such fines; and for connected purposes.

How on earth I will be able to do all that in 10 minutes, given the shambles of Govia Thameslink Railway, is a wonder. The GTR franchise, which covers Southern Rail, is not working. Notwithstanding the current problems with industrial action, incompetent management and Department for Transport failings, which have been aired all too frequently in this House, the system for pursuing complaints and achieving financial or other redress is simply not fit for purpose.

My Bill would apply to the whole UK rail network. While not intended as a silver bullet to resolve the problems of Southern, it would go some way towards disincentivising complacency over consistent failure to operate a decent service when some form of normality returns to our rail service—oh for those happy days of some form of normality in the Southern region! The truth is that when things go wrong on the railways, train operating companies can actually benefit.

There are two types of compensation payments at present. The first is the so-called schedule 8 payment from Network Rail to the train operators, when something goes wrong with the infrastructure—points failures, for example, or the notorious signal box fire at Penge in Reggie Perrin’s day. It is designed to compensate train operators for the impact of poor performance on their revenue and helps to reduce the risk premium factored into franchise bids.

Extraordinarily, the train companies are not required to pass on the compensation they receive in this way to the passengers who actually suffer the inconvenience and loss. It has been estimated that some 60% of rail compensation comes in this form. The Social Market Foundation calculated last year that the train operators raised £107 million from Network Rail for delays, while passengers received just £26 million of that, meaning that the train-operating companies profited by some £81 million.

The second form of compensation is that directly paid out by the train operators to the passenger when they are liable for delays and cancellations caused by staffing problems, rolling stock breakdown and so forth. The problem is that it depends specifically on passengers lodging a claim, which can be very bureaucratic and is often rejected on technicalities. The take-up rate for claims is very low. While recent events on Southern have changed that a fair bit, it comes from a low base.
In 2014, the Office of Rail and Road calculated that only 11% of passengers always or usually claim compensation. Subsequently, that has increased to around 35%, but it is still a minority. So passengers do not claim, and the train operators such as GTR benefit. On strike days, when salaries and energy costs are less, they are able to profit more as well.

GTR’s turnover is around £1.3 billion, over £1 billion of which comes from the central Government to run the train service. Yet in an answer to a parliamentary question earlier this year, the then rail Minister stated that just £2 million has been levied against GTR in respect of cancellation and short formation performance benchmarks, while some £2.2 million was paid out to passengers under the passenger’s charter and delay repay obligations. That is a total of just 0.4% of turnover, which is hardly an incentive—and that is before netting off the payments to GTR from Network Rail. Added to that, all train operators have different schemes and methods of compensating, and there is no industry benchmark. That is hardly an incentive to run an efficient service. There must be a better way of doing it.

Given that 47 million passenger journeys were cancelled or significantly late last year, this is a big problem that affects many regular travellers—our constituents. We want the current problem is that the passenger’s charter and delay repay compensation. That is a total of just 0.4% of turnover, which is hardly an incentive—and that is before netting off the payments to GTR from Network Rail. Added to that, all train operators have different schemes and methods of compensating, and there is no industry benchmark. That is hardly an incentive to run an efficient service. There must be a better way of doing it.

That is what I am proposing.

Frankly, it is extraordinary that there is currently no ombudsman system for rail complaints. That could and should have been introduced when the Consumer Rights Act 2015 was extended to rail companies, giving passengers the same legal protection they receive when paying for any other service or goods, improving their ability to obtain redress beyond the current delay thresholds and receiving that redress specifically in cash rather than travel vouchers.

What will my Bill do, Mr Speaker? I know you are desperate to know. First, it will overhaul the compensation scheme, creating a much tougher financial impact on train operating companies and a fairer and easier way of compensating passengers, with a more reliable reflection of the inconvenience and costs they have suffered. Every time a train is late beyond an agreed threshold, is cancelled altogether in advance or at short notice, or overruns a station, a penalty fine will be paid into a central pot independent of the train operator and before affected passengers have to claim. Passengers would then be able to claim directly from that pot, but in a much more centrifugal way.

Last week, I met a company that has devised the technology through which regular passengers can download an app, track arrival at stations, automatically lodge a compensation claim where appropriate and then get compensation paid directly into a bank account without any paperwork having to be lodged. The app goes live in January. By automating an unwieldy claims process, it will also reduce administration charges for the train operators. The Office of Rail and Road super-complaint response report gave a range of estimates for the manual processing of claims: between £1.80 and £39 per claim, which is extraordinary. I know that the Minister has promised automated refunds to a payment card, but that is still some years away and is fraught with verification problems, whereas this technology is available now.

Secondly, the penalty pot will be used to help fund a new beefed-up rail ombudsman, which I shall come on to in a few moments. Thirdly, any remaining funds will be used to offset fare rises, thereby giving a further payback to inconvenienced and hassled passengers. Although the new scheme is no silver bullet alone, it would recalibrate the balance of power back to aggrieved passengers, incentivise the train operator to stop running a shoddy service and instil a sense of urgency in operators to get problems sorted out.

The second part of my Bill will establish a new rail ombudsman with real teeth and proper statutory powers. This is based on practical proposals discussed with Ombudsman Services, which have now been endorsed by the consumer watchdog Which?. Yesterday, it said: “The Government must introduce a new ombudsman that all train companies have to sign up to so that passenger complaints are properly heard and resolved.” Which? supports my Bill.

The rail ombudsman would be based on the energy ombudsman model, which is already in operation and could be adapted for the rail sector to deal with both the train operating companies and Network Rail, helping to clarify responsibility for passenger problems in any given instance. The introduction of a rail ombudsman would help level the playing field between passengers and rail operators by establishing a strong independent second tier of redress. A rail ombudsman would not only greatly enhance the level of redress available to passengers, but help to improve confidence in the rail sector—something that is currently sorely lacking in the Southern region in particular.

The rail ombudsman would take up and resolve individual complaints and direct compensation, while overseeing the operation and thresholds to the penalty pot that I have described. It would lead to the awarding of compensation based on realistic levels of actual loss suffered by passengers. Typically under Direct Repay 15, passengers can currently claim just 25% of the cost of single fares. Of course the Minister recently announced one-month compensation for long-suffering passengers, but a one-month refund on a season ticket does not go far when people have to pay to stay in London or for a taxi back late at night from Three Bridges to the Sussex coast when they find themselves stranded.

The ombudsman would collect and analyse data to identify frequent and common problems of individual operators and be able to direct them to make remedies
or suffer forfeits. The rail ombudsman would identify longer-term problems within the sector as a whole, and work with the Government to recommend action to mitigate any impact before it causes further detriment to passengers.

As I said at the outset, these proposals alone do not represent an immediate solution to the mess that the GTR franchise is in at the moment. I believe, however, that they represent a practical way forward to change the dynamics within the rail industry when something goes wrong and our train-travelling constituents lose out first, last and most. Above all, I appreciate that most of our constituents are primarily concerned with being able to use a reliable rail service that gets them to work, school, college, hospital appointments and home again at roughly the times that they anticipated.

Compensation for an unreliable service is secondary. Our constituents may not be terribly interested in apportioning blame for current problems; they just need a service that works when they need it to work. I do not think those two things are mutually exclusive, and I believe that the measures in my Bill are long overdue and will help to achieve both objectives. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Tim Loughton, Sir Nicholas Soames, Sir Peter Bottomley, Ms Harriet Harman, Maria Caulfield, Nusrat Ghani, Peter Kyle, Huw Merriman, Chris Philp, Henry Smith, Caroline Ansell and Caroline Lucas present the Bill.

Tim Loughton accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March 2017, and to be printed (Bill 117).

Backbench Business

Leasehold and Commonhold Reform

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered leasehold and commonhold reform.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for accepting the bid for the debate from the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold reform. I co-chair the group with the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who I am happy to see is present. More than 50 Members of both Houses have joined the APPG since our inaugural meeting, which took place only a short time ago. I want to record the group’s thanks to Martin Boyd of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and Sebastian O’Kelly of the Campaign Against Retirement Leasehold Exploitation—Carlex—who act as our secretariat and advisers.

This debate is overdue. The front page of a library briefing makes the fundamental point. It states:

"Despite a good deal of legislative activity in this area, dissatisfaction remains."

I am sure that, were this not the last day before the Christmas recess, many more Members would be present, because the issue affects millions of homeowners. Under the heading “The extent of leasehold ownership”, the briefing states:

"DCLG published a technical paper…in August 2014…to produce a new estimate of 4.1 million leasehold dwellings in England in 2012-13…The Leasehold Knowledge Partnership…estimated that there were around 5.37 million leasehold properties…at the end of 2013.”

On commonhold, the briefing states:

"Commonhold tenure is viewed as offering several advantages over the leasehold system. It does not remove the obligation on residents to contribute to management/maintenance and major works, but it is argued to be a more transparent system."

Describing the advantages, it states:

"Commonhold will address the problem of lessees being beholden to an absentee landlord who cannot be bothered to carry out building maintenance and management, or who is more interested in trying to make a profit at their expense.”

I shall say much more about that later. The briefing continues:

"Commonhold will also remove the problem of leasehold property being a wasting asset. Commonholders will each have a perpetual interest, effectively akin to a freehold, in their individual unit. Standardised commonhold constitutional documents should be of general benefit.”

In my constituency, as in many, there is a mix of leaseholders: those who have bought former council properties under right-to-buy legislation—perhaps second, third or even fourth purchasers—and/or those who have either bought new properties built in east London as part of its regeneration, or bought into converted warehouses and the like which have been transformed into homes. The constituency contains the second highest number of leasehold properties in England, after Cities of London and Westminster.

Common issues affecting both types of property, new private sector and former public sector, include the length of leases, service charges, insurance fees,
refurbishment costs, recognition rights, ground rents and dispute resolution procedures. I shall deal with all those briefly, but I shall not cover event fees, forfeiture or retirement homes, because I am much less familiar with those problems and I know that other Members intend to raise them.

The length of leases varies from 99 to 999 years. Many people who buy their homes under leasehold believe that they are purchasing their property, but they are not; they are leasing it. Because some ground rents double every 10 years, mortgages can be more difficult to secure later in the lease for resale. As for service charges, in the former public sector there have been improvements in recent years, with more transparency of costs and detail to show reasonableness of charges. Previously, constituents of mine have been charged for lift costs in blocks with no lifts, and for garden upkeep in places with no gardens. Despite the improvements, however, there are still anomalies. The HomeOwners Alliance places with no gardens. Despite the improvements, however, there are still anomalies. The HomeOwners Alliance writes:

"Many new build freehold houses...on new housing estates are being sold by developers subject to a requirement for the owners to pay maintenance/service charge for common areas on the estate...freeholders in this situation (unlike leaseholders) are unable to bring claims to the Property Tribunal if they feel these charges are unreasonable."

My wife and I own such a freehold property.

Also in the private sector, I have tried to help residents on two large sites in my constituency, Canary Riverside and West India Quay. Both are controlled by a gentleman—well, I would rather say a person—called John Christodoulou, under the Yianis group. LKP has been very involved in assisting the residents. Both sites have tried to work constructively with the landlord’s managing agents over many years, but have suffered from very poor management. Both had not had accounts for years, regardless of what the legislation may say is required. Only when the Canary Riverside site took its latest action through the tribunal process, to replace the landlord’s agent through fault, did the accounts emerge, and what they showed was a far from pretty picture. In the decision, the tribunal was highly critical of many aspects of the landlord’s management, including the fact that it had not had a professional planned maintenance programme and then, having obtained one, had failed to implement it.

Since the court’s appointment of a new manager, which began in October this year, the landlord’s solicitor, a Mr David Marsden of Trowers & Hamlins, appears to have bombarded the court-appointed manager with a huge number of emails: 22 in October, 29 in November, and 37 so far this month. It strikes me as very important that when the landlord’s management is removed through fault, as happened in this case, the tribunal should act to protect the court-appointed manager from what appears to be little short of harassment. The residents at Canary Riverside wrote to me yesterday, saying:

“In addition to bombarding our Tribunal-appointed Manager with emails, the Manager is being ground down by the continuous litigation being brought by the landlord in an attempt to undermine the FTT’s”—

first-tier tribunal’s—

decision and frustrate the new management.

There is a real risk that Canary riverside lessees could find themselves in a worse position than if we had never taken the Section 24 action: i.e., back under the management of a landlord who knows the law does not protect lessees in large mixed-use developments.

The FTT-appointed Manager is increasingly finding himself in an untenable position, forced to spend more time dealing with the landlord’s demands and injunctions than resolving the estate management issues he was appointed to remedy.

Section 24 appears only to work if the landlord agrees, even if a decision is unequivocally in lessees’ favour.

Christodoulou is currently seeking a Judicial Review in an attempt to undo the FTT’s decision (having had three appeals fail at the FTT and Upper Tribunal).

He is also taking every opportunity to apply to the High Court to chip away at the Manager’s powers. On Friday he obtained an injunction that effectively granted him and his staff unfettered access to the Canary Riverside estate. An estate he no longer manages.

The lessees at Canary Riverside spent over two years securing the FTT’s decision—at a considerable cost, both financially and in respect of the time and energy needed to pursue legal action. It has been a huge endeavour.

But it seems the...hearing was just the beginning of our legal battle. The landlord’s fees were £335,000 for the FTT hearing. Since then there have been three appeals, a Judicial Review pending, and several High Court injunction hearings. Legal fees could easily top £500,000, and our (billionaire) landlord knows that the more legal resources he throws at winning, the more likely he is to win.

Section 24”—

and I say this to the Minister—

“is not fit for purpose, and we”—

the residents—

“will end up over £500,000 poorer”—

half a million pounds worse off—

“and with nowhere else to turn."

None of this impacts the value of Christodoulou’s investment—the only people damaged by poor estate management and high service charges is the lessees.”

I should welcome the Minister’s comments on that.

Over at West India Quay, Christmas eve will mark a new and dismal milestone: the sixth year of accounts will become overdue. The residents have had none since 2010, and more than £10 million of their cash is unaccounted for. In its 14 years of occupation, their building has never been subject to a planned preventive maintenance report. I ask the Minister, “How can that be allowed?” In fact, it can be allowed because there is no enforcement action for the residents to try to ensure that the property managing agents and owners do something about it.

Those are two examples of the problems faced by residents who are up against powerful, uncaring and unscrupulous landlords.

In 2012, the consumer organisation Which? estimated that £700 million was being overcharged in service charges each year. That was when everyone thought that there were between 2 million and 2.5 million leasehold homes. Given the size of the sector as we now know it to be, that suggests that £1.4 billion may be being overcharged each year. That cannot be right either.

Freeholders in one block in my constituency were asked for £78,000 to insure a building containing about 32 flats. Several of them worked in the sector, and they were sure that £15,000 would have been a more appropriate charge. They settled for £22,000 after negotiation.
Refurbishment costs mostly affect former council blocks, and leaseholders are almost at the mercy of councils or housing associations. Trying to secure detailed bills or tenders, guarantees on completion of work being undertaken and assurances of the quality of the work being undertaken has proved very difficult and unreasonable, especially from public sector organisations. Fortunately, this is changing, but progress is very slow.

Recognition rights is a source of much consternation in both the private and the public sectors. I have one group of residents in Campbell Road who won the first-tier tribunal for recognition of their residents association, but their social landlord, Tower Hamlets Homes, is appealing against the ruling. There is an inbuilt sense of reverse snobbery and prejudice against leaseholders among some in the social housing sector.

There is recognition resistance in the private sector, too. One of my first such cases, nearly 20 years ago, was from residents in the Cascades block, the first high-rise private residential block on the Isle of Dogs in docklands. The freeholder was harassing them in an attempt to frustrate their efforts to set up a residents association to represent them on service and maintenance charges.

On dispute resolution procedures, I have mentioned the problems at Canary Riverside and West India Quay, but the costs of high-powered barristers defending freeholders at tribunal is now a disgrace. The procedures were originally supposed to be relatively informal. That has totally changed. A constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris), Paddy McHugh, has written to me saying:

“Any lessee who files a case at tribunal can expect to face a Barrister acting for the landlord. The costs in issue can outweigh paying for legal representation while a landlord is usually free to put his legal costs onto the service charge even against lessees not paying for legal representation while a landlord is usually free to put his legal costs onto the service charge even against lessees not party to the case, whether or not the landlord is the respondent.”

This surely cannot be right either. Where is the justice in a system that favours billionaires protecting their profits over ordinary working people trying to protect their homes?

Ground rents have been the subject of a number of articles in the press and media reports recently.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing a debate on this important topic, which was raised with me by the Charter Quay residents association in Kingston—and since he raises the point, I should say that I am a barrister, although thankfully not in the landlord and tenant sector. Does he agree that many people entering these agreements are entirely unaware that the landlords have the power to make huge increases in ground rents, and if this practice is deemed acceptable, at the very least tenants going into these agreements should have very clear information about what the landlords can do, and what their rights are as tenants and how they can challenge the landlord?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. As has been evident at a number of meetings that the hon. Member for Worthing West and I have had with legal and property experts and individual constituents from across the country, many people do not recognise the significance of this issue, including many lawyers. People are keen to get their hands on their first home or their new property and therefore will take the advice of lawyers who may not be fully conversant with the implications in this regard.

There is, to an extent, some relatively good news. After the outcry in a number of media reports, several of the large developers have announced that their policy of doubling ground rents every 10 years, which is the equivalent of 7% interest rates in perpetuity, is untenable and they are returning to the retail prices index. I am sure that the hon. Member for Worthing West, who is in my hon. Friend for the purposes of this debate, will be raising that more extensively later. This is a success that the campaigning charities, residents associations and others have had. A number of the developers are backtracking, but that is not happening right across the piece. The question to the Minister is how we protect everybody from the rogues who will not do the right thing and prevent them from being subject to this abuse.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman has brought this subject up. My calculation is that if a £250,000 house has a £250 ground rent that doubles every 10 years, over 60 years the successive leaseholders will have paid £157,500. For that still to be 1% of the value, the house will have to be worth £80 million; that is in the first 60 years of a lease.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman emphasises the absurdity of this situation and the abuse. It is a big issue, as he knows; he has been campaigning on it and the all-party group will continue to campaign on it. We have had a modicum of success so far. I think there is an opportunity to drive this issue into reverse and deal with this charge, which should have been peppercorn or tokenistic, but which is now a much more difficult issue for purchasers. There is an opportunity to take it back into the realms of where it should have been or to abolish it altogether.

The aims of the all-party group are relatively simple: to reduce the opportunities for exploitation; to alleviate the distress and hardship of leaseholders, particularly the elderly; to do away with the high costs of the property tribunal; to examine incidences of lease forfeiture; to examine the value of retirement leasehold properties; to unearth and publicise scandalous behaviour of professionals involved in the leasehold sector; to examine insurance commissions and matters where leaseholders pay but are not party to the contract; and to ensure that the right-to-manage legislation acts as intended.

We have had a number of successes so far, including the growth of the all-party group. It has been well attended, with many professionals at the round tables organised by LKP and us, helped by Miss Katherine O’Riordan from the hon. Gentleman’s office, to make sure that the meetings are successful. We have had significant media interest, and interest from Ministers and shadow Ministers; I am pleased both the Minister for Housing and Planning and his shadow Minister are in their places today. We look forward to hearing what they have to say on these issues. We have had interest, too, from senior civil servants at the Department for Communities and Local Government, which we are grateful for because it demonstrates that both Government and Opposition are taking this matter seriously. There is a recognition that everything is not quite well here and things need to be examined. We also have today’s debate in which to raise the issue.
[Jim Fitzpatrick]

Some matters are easier to resolve than others, and some will require legislation, but it is not all bad news. The industry is also trying to clean up the sector, with the Association of Residential Management Agents, led by Dr Nigel Glen, introducing ARMA-Q, its code of practice for property management companies, and the appointment of a regulator for the sector to oversee and assist in dispute resolution procedures. Many decent professional organisations have joined, and even a number outside ARMA are decent companies too, but sadly there are still too many bullies, cowboys and crooks in the sector. For the Government to feel comfortable with the legislation as it stands is unacceptable. We need not only better regulation, better protection and advice, but legislation. Millions of citizens are looking to their politicians of whichever party to remedy their distress.

In conclusion, I return to my original comment from the Library:

“Despite a good deal of legislative activity in this area, dissatisfaction remains.”

This problem goes back to the ’90s. Governments of both main parties have tried to resolve it and have been unsuccessful, so in some senses it is not a party political issue. But until a Government recognise the unfairness, the robbery and the dissatisfaction, many good people issue. But until a Government recognise the unfairness, unsuccessful, so in some senses it is not a party political

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1.38 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)—my hon. Friend—referred to things going wrong on purpose, and things sometimes going wrong by mistake.

To avoid something going wrong by mistake, I ask the Government, and particularly the Ministry of Justice, to abandon the opportunity of winning a forfeiture order on a residential home over a smallish debt. By all means, in extremis, an asset might have to be ordered to be sold, but the surplus value should certainly go to the leaseholder and should not be forfeited to the freeholder.

One of the worst cases is that of Plantation Wharf in Battersea. Two elderly people applied to challenge management costs of about £9,000. The leasehold valuation tribunal—the lower property tribunal—agreed with them in large part and struck off about £7,000. There were then applications for costs. One of the leaseholders had read on the Government website that the cost of going to the leasehold valuation tribunal was £500 and therefore assumed that there was nothing in the cost application. By inattention, he ended up bouncing between various courts and owing over £70,000. A forfeiture order was granted, with even the mortgage lender not realising that its part of the asset would be forfeited as well.

When the insurance company that provided the mortgage woke up at the last moment—at the prompting of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, to which I pay tribute—the debt was settled and the man was able to go off to his new home with the bulk of his equity. He should never have been forced to pay anything, because if someone wins £5,000 out of £7,000, for example, or £7,000 out of £9,000, that should be regarded as a win, not a score draw. At it happens, the freeholder in that case was not an avaricious crook, but people who were more used to commercial dealings and thought that everyone was professionally advised and could afford to pay costs.

I have a challenge to everybody in the field: do not assume that other people are as clever, wily or crooked as you are. Whether this was criminal or not is not for me to judge, but one crook is Martin Paine—pain with an e on the end—who has taken “lease” beyond sleaze, almost by adding a letter at the beginning, and into an art form. He owns a number of short leases, and anyone who wants to sell them has to get an extension. My understanding is that he offers legally valid, informal extensions. Under a formal extension, the ground rent reverts to virtually nothing.

Martin Paine’s informal leases contain a provision that doubles the ground rent every 10 years or so, but that is written into the lease in such a way that even experienced solicitors fail to find the wording or to connect the clauses together. A person, who may be a first-time buyer of a low-value flat, may then discover that they are asked for enormously high ground rents, and they are enormously high because Martin Paine has written the provision back to the first granting of the lease, not from the time of the extension. A flat might therefore be worth £150,000, but the leaseholder will be asked for thousands of pounds a year in ground rent, with the prospect of that going up. When the leaseholder complains, Mr Paine’s practice, as I understand it, is to say, “Sue your solicitor.” I therefore recommend that providers of indemnity insurance for solicitors get together, which I think they can do without being a cartel, and ask, “What pattern of claims have we had from those we insure?” to see whether this crookedness can be stopped.

Martin Paine will then occasionally buy back the flat at a low price and remarket it with the same terms. To do that once could be regarded as incompetence; to do it twice on the same property is deserving of the word “crooked.” Every single auctioneer should do what we had to recommend to one respectable auction house: look at the leases. It turned out, of course, that Martin Paine had not actually supplied the lease to the auctioneers early on—it was withdrawn.

We should not have to rely on the chance action of a campaigning charity such as LKP or Carlex—the Campaign Against Retirement Leasehold Exploitation—or a passing Member of Parliament, to get things put right.

I ought to declare an interest in that I own the lease on a flat in a freehold building in Worthing. We had a good landlord and a good managing agent, which has now been succeeded by another good managing agent. The freeholder decided that he was going to retire and suggested to the six leaseholders that we might like to buy the freehold from him—and we did. We have not had any problems at any point. Together, we are a good association, and we had our most recent meeting on Friday. However, that is not the experience of all others.

I come now to one of the latest manifestations of things going wrong. Over the past 20 years, some house builders have returned to selling houses on leasehold terms. I have it by communication from one house builder that the price it can get for selling a house leasehold is within 1% of selling it freehold. What is the reason for selling it leasehold? Some argue that the tradition in the north-west is different—it should not...
be—and some say that if someone can get away with something, others will copy. There are now examples in north London of builders producing roughly the same kind of home on either side of the street, with some freehold and some leasehold.

If a leasehold contains a provision that doubles the ground rent every 10 years, the example that I provided earlier on applies. I might have got the maths wrong because I was doing this late at night, but it is wrong to argue that an ordinary home that started at £250,000 needs to be worth £80 million in 60 years’ time to justify a ground rent that doubles every 10 years—by the rule of 72, we know that that means that it is going up by over 7% a year. I ask the corporate responsibility experts who occasionally go to the annual general meetings of quoted companies to start raising that with the house builders. I would also like the Home Builders Federation to talk about how the practice is justifiable. Its representatives might say that it is just a commercial deal by some of its members and nothing to do with them, but I say that it is to do with them.

I see that the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) is in the Chamber. The people who established and ran Cadbury were the sort of people who did not need Members of Parliament to remind them of how to behave; they knew in their bones, their blood and their heart that people should be treated properly.

I own some shares in Persimmon and some in Taylor Wimpey, and I might buy some shares in other builders. If necessary, I shall go to their AGMs, giving notice in advance, to ask what they will do to unwound the problems that they created in the past. Taylor Wimpey says that it was unaware of what was going on before it came together, because it is an amalgamation of many businesses, but it knows now. The problem comes with putting things right.

If a building firm—I am not focusing on Taylor Wimpey, because I think it has realised that there are issues to investigate—sells the freeholds, it prevents itself from being able to treat its leaseholders properly.

Many leaseholders buy a flat through solicitors who work for the seller, and those solicitors will probably have attendance notes and perhaps some letters that point out the provisions of the ground rent. That may or may not be the case. What I doubt—I asked one solicitor, but he has not yet received the evidence—is whether the attendance note and the letters point out that if someone were to buy their freehold in the first three years, they might be able to get it very cheaply, perhaps at a multiple of 10 times the ground rent, but that if they wait and the first freeholder sells to another, the new freeholder may say, “Actually, because interest rates have gone down, the value of the ground rent has gone up, and you have to buy it at the new multiple of the value of the ground rent.” Why do the Government not just agree a straightforward graph to show what the purchase price for a freehold ought to be at various stages?

I interrupt myself now to say that I was going speak for a long section on hedonic regression and Sloane Stanley Estate v. Mundy. As part of that case, Wellcome Trust interests managed to persuade an upper property tribunal of two people to make a change in the valuation of short leases, which probably lifted the apparent cost of extending leases by about 40%.

It is good for the Wellcome Trust to get good publicity for saying that it will give £1 billion to good causes—mostly medical research—this year. I do not mind its chief investment person being paid £5 million if they have lifted the capital value of the assets by 18% in the last year.

If £1 billion of those assets involves the estate that was bought from the Henry Smith Charity, which was established to help children and others with its income, and if the Wellcome Trust bought that estate because it managed to persuade people, without a public interest representative present, that the cost of enfranchisement or extension should go up so enormously, something is seriously wrong. It will take people in government and their advisers to work out what that is.

If there is an appeal against that Mundy case, I hope that the Government will associate themselves with it and try to make sure that, on the hedonic regression, the calculations go back to before the Leasehold Reform, Housing and Urban Development Act 1993, because after that Act the values were affected by what it said. I think that James Wyatt and Parthenia Valuation are more likely to be right. I hope that the appeal succeeds, and that the Government will make sure that if it does not, the decision in the Mundy case will be reversed by statute.

I return to the issue of smaller leaseholders. If I were a small leaseholder applying either for an extension or to buy my freehold, I would find that the freeholder’s costs has could be put back on to the leaseholders, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse. But what about the costs to me? I have to go to surveyors and lawyers. I am new to this and I am dealing with freeholders who do this multiple times a week or a year. They are very experienced and they are often very rich.

Perhaps the Government could bring in simple graphs to cover most cases where people could ask, “Where do I stand on the graph? What is the length of the lease? What are the terms?” The Government could say, “By the way, there is going to be a cap on ground rents, so you can’t go monetising those and making the leaseholder buy them out on some prospective multiple just because the bank reference rate is very low and the apparent cost of buying them out becomes very high.”

Jim Fitzpatrick: I apologise for interrupting as the hon. Gentleman is making a good point. When the dispute resolution procedure was originally designed, was it not supposed to create a relatively informal arrangement whereby residents could go to a tribunal to argue their case? That has been completely distorted by some of these unscrupulous freeholder landlords bringing in high-powered barristers and then charging their fees to the residents, whether they win or lose.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I agree completely. Moreover, that reminds me that the Government have had a review of LEASE—the leasehold advisory service—and I fear that the decision for it to try to make itself sustaining within the next four years is wrong. LEASE is chaired by Roger Southam, and he and his wife know quite a bit about leasehold property. His predecessor was Deep Sagar, during whom time LEASE would hold fundraising conferences where it would take the surplus, and the people who paid to come would listen to experts explaining how they could gain extra income from leaseholders.
For example, someone might have stood up there and said, “Do you know, the freeholder gets the managing agent to arrange the insurance, it is paid for by the leaseholders and the commission can stick with the freeholder end?” My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) may address the issue of insurance later. So if the commission happened to be 40% or 50%, a leaseholder would be paying twice as much as they should.

What happens when the leaseholders want to get together? Again, that will be a point of law for the Government to consider. I do not think that anyone expects the Minister to be able to answer all the points raised today, but we will want to see early in the new year a proposed programme of action, which can then develop into reducing the abuse and improving the happiness.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I commend the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for all their work on this incredibly important subject. Given all the complexity that the hon. Gentleman is describing, and the scope for manipulation and exploitation, is anything resembling the current pattern of leasehold tenure actually just not fit for purpose? Do we not need to move to a system that has either freehold vested in resident-controlled management companies, or a form of commonhold that works properly?

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that.

We are talking about a number of issues that do not always come together. The first is that commonhold was recommended by the Law Commission 20 or 30 years ago, and Parliament and government thought they have made legal provision for it to come in, but it does not work. We understand that by 2009, within seven years of the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002, officials in the Ministry of Justice and perhaps Ministers, too, knew it was not working. Some who are not very knowledgeable say that it cannot work. Others who have been outside the country know that no other country—no other significant country, as far as I know—has kept the system that we developed 100 or 200 years ago.

Besides the flat in Worthing, I have a home around the corner from here. It was built in about the 1720s and it had a 99-year lease, on the basis that in that time it would either fall down or burn down; people were not expecting houses to go on lasting forever. I pay tribute to George Thomas, now Lord Tonypandy, who, in his firebrand days, campaigned to get leasehold reform and rent Acts in place so that the people in south Wales could be saved from bad landlords and freeholders.

I have in my hand the record of the debate on 8 March 1991, when Dudley Fishburn, then the MP for Kensington, paid tribute to his predecessor, Brandon Rhys Williams, who was one of the early people to start campaigning on leasehold. In a remarkable contribution, Terry Lewis, the then MP for Worsley, made reference to a number of the abuses that existed then. This was a non-party issue then, as it is now. Nearly all the scandals that Dudley Fishburn was talking about apply now, especially to the shorter-term leases.

Commonhold works, perhaps under different titles, in parts of Australia, particularly in New South Wales, with strata holdings. People from there have come before our all-party group and our forums to talk about this. The problems we have are not found in Canada, New Zealand or South Africa, or in France and Germany. Let us consider what happens when we give people interest in the maintenance of their flats. At the moment, if someone has a leasehold and improves their property, the value goes eventually to the freeholder. If they can get rid of the freeholder, not only is the abuse stopped, but people are encouraged to invest in things that matter to them. I strongly recommend that 1991 debate to hon. Members, and I was going to go through it at greater length.

What I will do is talk about some of the abuses. Benjamin Mire, a well-known surveyor and leasehold property manager, was going to be removed by the Ministry of Justice as a person not fit for judicial office, but by the time the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office had concluded its investigations, he had retired or resigned days before he would have been dismissed. Had he not done this, the full report would have come out into the open, but as he jumped before he was pushed he did not. He is not fit for judicial office and he is not fit to go on being a registered member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. The problem is that his clever lawyers, and perhaps a display of not enormous competence by RICS, have left the details of the charges against him by RICS not fully out in the open. There were 35 cases where he or his company, Trust Property Management, were appearing at the property tribunal. There were failings by almost everyone involved.

The problem with the tribunal is that it does not have the power to fine for repeat offences. If it did, Mr Benjamin Mire would have been fined significantly. Everyone is entitled to a fair hearing, but let me give an example of a finding in one case where the trust acted as a property manager. It was stated:

“The landlords have had scant regard to the law and the RICS Management Code in respect of the costs of the proposed interior decorations.”

How can a self-regulation system that does not consider such court findings as warranting even an admonition retain the confidence of the general public? The Government have argued for years that there is no need for statutory regulation, but can anyone name a group that supports that position? Even the main managing agents trade body, the Association of Residential Managing Agents—ARMA—has been asking the Government to regulate the sector.

Leasehold is the only part of the housing market where an unregulated person can hold huge amounts of leaseholder funds and yet has no obligation to act in the leaseholder’s interests. Let me remind the House of something: when the freeholder appoints a managing agent, who does the managing agent work for? It is the freeholder.

I ask Ministers please to establish a legal position so that the leaseholder has an interest in everything that happens either with their money or in the block where they own the lease.

In the CBRE report—the most recent I have seen is from 2013—there are references to “soft income”. We still have too many examples of landlords, sometimes
those who even own their own agents, skimming on huge insurance commissions. That was reported by the Financial Conduct Authority as recently as two years ago, when it said—this backs up what I said earlier—that it was not uncommon to charge commissions of more than 40%. The worst situations are those in which the landlords’ own managing agents provide contracts through companies they own, which can result in poor services and high costs. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport might remind the House later of whether there was such a link between the freeholder and the managing agent in Plymouth.

I cannot distinguish between one Tchenguiz brother and the other, or between them and the Tchenguiz trusts, so I will talk about Tchenguiz interests and those who know can pick up on whether they are involved or affected. There are two points on which I criticise them. One was when they controlled Peverel, property managing agents who owned a business called Cirrus—as in the cloud. When some of the company’s large number of freehold blocks were said to have needed the call system replaced, there was a competition between the very big firm, Cirrus, and two little minnows. So, if we think that 99.9% was Cirrus and 0.1% was those two little minnows, then there was no competition, really. Sadly, the economic unit of the police, the Financial Conduct Authority and the Serious Fraud Office did not manage to get together at the same time to work out how to deal with this rip-off of millions of pounds from leaseholders.

When Peverel/Cirrus discovered that the game was up, they declared that they had been involved in collusive cartel bidding. We know from the Virgin-BA case that the first to declare that they have been involved in a cartel is penalty free. The fact is that the size of Cirrus compared with the size of the minnows made that an absurd judgment. If the police, the fraud office and the FCA had been together, they would have stopped it, but they did not, so those involved got off scot-free.

The other Tchenguiz interest was in Charter Quay in Richmond upon Thames—

James Berry: Kingston.

Sir Peter Bottomley: In Kingston. The numbers might be wrong, but they are illustrative. Imagine the Tchenguiz interest buying the freehold of Charter Quay for £750,000 and then, in the same year, writing the value up to £2 million, £3 million or £4 million, before borrowing, say, £2 million against it. When the leaseholders eventually get together, they discover on the accounts that the Tchenguiz interest—or someone—has been running an office phone through the lift phone in the block of flats to get a good deal from the telephone providers.

The leaseholders then get control of management and apply for the freehold, only for the freehold block to be estimated not at £750,000, and not £2 million, £3 million or £4 million, but at just under £1 million. It came down to about a third of the valuation that the new owners had put on it. In that case, I think, there was a settlement before the thing was finally determined by the court, but the figures are there.

The freehold went from £750,000 to £900,000, having gone to £2 million, £3 million or £4 million in between. I ask the professional regulators for the bankers involved in the loan, the surveyors who went along with the valuation and the accountants who did the accounts to ask how they explain this. I think that there was professional incompetence or collusion, and that is not what professionals are supposed to do. I hope that it is not happening again now.

James Berry: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for mentioning Charter Quay in my constituency, as well as the fantastic campaigning work done by the residents association to overturn a situation caused by the skulduggery of the Tchenguiz operation. I should point out that I have a property that I rent out—not in Charter Quay or anywhere in the constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that a lot of people living in leasehold properties are older people who have downsized and can ill afford the additional and inflated costs and expenses associated with such properties?

Sir Peter Bottomley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

If a leaseholder wants to exercise their rights under the law or to stop being abused because someone is trying to assert rights that they do not have, they have to know 22 Acts of Parliament, regulations and codes. Tribunals, whether in property or employment, ought not to allow some clever QC to come along and say that there is one thing that they have not been aware of that means that the rest of the case falls away; they should ask whether most of the case has been established, in which case the precise details of law—so long as what the tribunal decides is not unlawful—should carry through. The presumption should be that if there is trickery—legal or economic—or unfair pressure, the small person’s voice should come out on top.

Even during the publicity over the past two or three days, people who have spoken up about the abuse they have experienced because of the ground rent scandal have received lawyer’s letters on behalf of other lawyers saying, “You shouldn’t be saying that.” What is this place supposed to be like if we cannot hear our constituents say what their experiences are? I asked those lawyers to respond to me by 10.30 today, so perhaps the email has come in while I have been speaking, but I think that people ought to start asking whether these are sensible letters to be sending. We should be saying that part of being a lawyer is trying to make sure that everyone has their voice heard properly.

Lord Faulks said on behalf of the coalition Government in 2014 that he did not plan to review the commonhold/leasehold format. I think he should—not him, it is not personal, but the Government certainly should. It ought to be possible with the help of good lawyers. Guy Fetherstonhaugh QC, who presented a paper that is in the notes of the all-party group, has given good advice on how that could happen. I give strong commendation to Philip Rainey QC, who addressed our meeting last week and gave various proposals for what could work and could do so quite fast. That does not solve all problems easily, but it makes most difficult problems become easier and makes easy ones go away.

It is tempting to go on for rather longer than the House would wish, but I have one recommendation. Going back to LEASE, the advisory service, I do not think that it has ever had a leaseholder representative as a member of its board. If we are to have six members on the board, I would have at least two with leaseholder
interests—one who is a leaseholder and one who is part of the campaigning groups and charities that try to help to represent leaseholders. I would certainly ask those who appoint the chairman of LEASE to consult broadly—not just with people like me—about the experience, ability, talents and attitude we want the chairman to have to give guidance to Anthony Essien, the chief executive, against whom I make no critical comment as he has always been responsive, helpful and straight. If the appointment of a new chairman is coming up, I ask the Government to consult as there is some expertise around and in every other field I have known people get consulted if there is a serious basis for that.

I turn briefly now, if I may, to park homes. In my constituency and the constituencies beside it, Bognor Regis and Littlehampton and Arundel and South Downs, some park homes have recently been developed in a way I would regard as a shocking example of misused legal knowledge. The person involves takes a park home, says that it is a holiday home, and that it is not, and tries to fit it between the two, charging enormously high rents. I ought perhaps to apply for an Adjournment debate on the case I have. The Minister should invite Members to send in constituency cases of park home problems and the case I have. The Minister should invite Members to send in constituency cases of park home problems and people using the law in ways that are not justified. I would regard as a shocking example of misused legal knowledge. The person involves takes a park home, says that it is a holiday home, and that it is not, and tries to fit it between the two, charging enormously high rents. I ought perhaps to apply for an Adjournment debate on the case I have. The Minister should invite Members to send in constituency cases of park home problems and people using the law in ways that are not justified. I encourage the experts in Arun District Council, who have been doing the best they can, to send in their cases if there is a serious basis for that.

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Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I know that his constituency is affected by the issue. I have yet to see any evidence that higher ground rents result in any kind of service, particularly for the properties that I am talking about. Obviously, leasehold flats are a slightly different matter. I remember when it was common, if there was a leasehold, for the rent to be described as a peppercorn rent. The implication was that that was nothing other than a symbolic exchange.

Sir Peter Bottomley: A service charge or maintenance charge is one thing; the ground produces nothing. I meant to pay tribute to Bob Bessell of Retirement Security who, when asked at the all-party meeting what the ground rent was for, said that it does not produce anything of value so he goes for only a peppercorn. It seems to me that if he can say that openly, others should as well.

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is spot-on. The notional figures that we are used to seeing as ground or peppercorn rents ought to come back. We have seen a drip-feed of figures coming in, relatively modest to start with—more than a peppercorn, but still modest—and the ratcheting up of those figures in some leases is my main concern today.

When people buy their home, they like to know who they are buying it from, but leaseholds are often sold on to third parties who can then vary the agreed terms of the leasehold, at which point—this is a scandal—developers claim that it is no longer anything to do with them. This is an issue affecting my constituency. I have been contacted by a number of constituents affected by it. One, Beverley O’Malley, bought a Taylor Wimpey property. That company provided her with a letter at the point of sale stating that she would have first refusal to buy the leasehold at 15 times the ground rent, plus £199 for legal costs. That lease has been sold on without any option to purchase at this time, and she has now been informed that the letter provided by Taylor Wimpey is not worth the paper it is written on.

Another constituent of mine bought her property from Bellway in 2010 with a lease of 150 years and a ground rent of £125 per annum. In July 2015 a quote of £3,750 to purchase the freehold was provided, which equated to 30 times the ground rent. However, in March 2016, when attempting to purchase the freehold, my constituent was informed that the lease had been sold to a company called Adriatic, with Homeground acting as the management company, although quite what it is managing remains to be seen. Following this transfer, my constituent received a new quote to purchase the freehold at £12,750. That is more than 10 times the ground rent. No explanation was provided as to why the price had gone up so much, but counter-offers for purchasing the freehold were made by my constituent’s solicitors, which resulted in a revised quote of £6,750.

The quadrupling of the buy-out price for the ground rent, then the halving of it after negotiations started, as well as information given to me that the prices quoted can vary significantly for almost identical properties, suggests that the buy-out costs are calculated on nothing more than what the investors think they can get away with. The same constituent recently obtained planning permission to extend her home, but was told that she needed to obtain consent from Homeground in order to proceed, for which she was charged a fee of £333. However, following payment of that amount, an additional £2,440 was requested for the same purpose. This amounts to nothing less than racketeering and it should be stamped out.

Possibly the most alarming case that I have heard is that of my constituent Lindsay Lloyd, who bought a Taylor Wimpey property in 2009 on a long-term lease. She was reassured that such leases were common practice and that she would be able to purchase the freehold in future for £2,600. She received that advice from solicitors who were recommended to her by Taylor Wimpey, and she felt under some pressure to appoint them. She was advised that the lease did not impose an unduly onerous or prejudicial burden.

I wonder whether whoever was advising Ms Lloyd had even read the lease. I have, and it states that the ground rent will double every 10 years, so next year, for example, it will rise from £175 to £350 a year, which is a big increase. I can accept that £350 a year for ground rent does not sound too bad, but in 50 years’ time it will be over £11,000, in 100 years’ time it will be over £350,000, and in 200 years’ time—I hope the houses last that long—it will be a staggering £367 million a year. Nobody expects to be around in 200 years’ time, but anyone who wants to buy the house will think twice once they realise that they would be agreeing to a contract that commits them to an annual payment of millions of pounds. What that means in practice, of course, is that nobody would purchase the property, so where does that leave existing owners? I really want to hear about that from the Minister today.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The solicitor’s advice is a critical part of this. If the solicitor does not tell the first purchaser that this is a penal clause, what advice would they give to a prospective buyer six years later, who would be facing a doubling of the ground rent in four years’ time? It seems to me that the advice ought to be the same, but I bet it would not be.

Justin Madders: As a former practising solicitor—not in this area, I hasten to add—I think it is fair to say that some solicitors are now probably more alive to the traps that can be found in leases. I have looked at my constituent’s lease, and to say that it is not set out very clearly would be an understatement, but it still should have been picked up on.

Bob Stewart: Following what my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) has just said, surely it is the responsibility of a solicitor helping someone to buy a house to point these things out, because they are professionally qualified and they should know very well what is happening. I cannot understand why that does not happen.

Justin Madders: I think that individual solicitors have to answer for what they have done. From my knowledge of the profession, I think that over the years we have seen a much more streamlined process for advising people on their purchases and sales and lots of standard documentation, which I think is why some of these things have been allowed to happen. I suppose the real question is this: why would a developer want to put such an onerous clause in a sales document, knowing
that if word of it got out people would think very carefully about whether they wanted to buy the property? As we know, they are selling these leases on to third parties, so actually there is no benefit to them. That is the heart of it. I do not think that the legal profession comes out of this with any great plaudits, but clearly the fault for having the clauses in the first place lies with the developers, and I have yet to hear any reasonable explanation for why they are there in the first place.

My constituents feel that they have been duped by Taylor Wimpey. The reservation form that they signed stated that the ground rent was £175 a year, and there was no mention of it doubling every 10 years. I understand that Taylor Wimpey has now decided not to sell any new properties on a leasehold basis, which is good news—

Sir Peter Bottomley: Any new houses.

Justin Madders: Yes, any new houses. But that does not help my constituents, who believe that they have been comprehensively stitched up. That is why this place has to take action.

At the moment there is no way out of this for my constituent. She recently inquired about purchasing the lease and discovered that it has been sold to a company called E&J Estates, which is now quoting her a price of £32,000 to purchase it. No wonder it quoted a price over 10 times what she had originally been offered, given what it could rake in over the years. However, having already made significant commitments to purchase the property in the first place, my constituent was simply unable to stump up such a significant amount.

As disappointing as the response from E&J Estates was, it was a struggle even to get a response from it at all. It initially refused to speak to my constituent about her circumstances, stating that it had a “long-term interest in the property.” Well, so does she: it is her home. And it is a home that has been saddled with an obligation so onerous, so outrageous, that nobody with an ounce of decency in their body would not say that this place had better do something about it.

It is not enough to say that leasehold valuation tribunals are there to resolve these issues, because these companies are going out of their way to obstruct and delay the process. I do not know whether anybody here has taken the time to read one of the tribunals’ decisions, but I suspect that very few people would feel comfortable going into one of them without a lawyer, and probably also a surveyor. Certainly the freeholders seem to do that, and from what I have seen they also put the cost of their representation back on to the homeowners as well, rubbing salt into an already very expensive wound.

Although I have named Bellway and Taylor Wimpey, the practice of selling new builds on a leasehold basis appears to be commonplace across the majority of new build estates in my constituency. I should make it clear that the examples I have given of how my constituents are adversely affected do not apply to every developer selling leasehold properties, although every developer I have contacted has indicated that they intend to sell on their interest in the leasehold at some point. That really is where things go wrong, because once they sell them on, the new owners have no interest in anything other than extracting the maximum amount of profit from their asset.

Of course I accept that some properties by their nature lend themselves to being leasehold, but that does not apply to the vast majority of the properties being built in my constituency, which are detached or semi-detached family homes. There really is no reason for those properties to be sold as leasehold. It is a cynical business decision, which will in the long run damage the reputation of those involved.

It is also disappointing that the newest development in my constituency, currently being constructed by Redrow Homes, is also being sold on a leasehold basis. Redrow tells me that this fact is made known to purchasers before they reserve their property, although I note that on its website the promotion of that particular development makes no mention of it. What is particularly disappointing is that Redrow, despite my asking twice why it feels the need to sell large detached family homes on a leasehold basis, offers no justification whatsoever.

It is quite clear that this situation needs to be addressed. I have several questions for the Minister. My first is very simple: are the Government happy with this state of affairs? If not, will he set out today, or in the very near future, exactly what he will do to stop these scandalous practices? Does he agree that developers should be prohibited from recommending a particular solicitor to purchasers because of the clear potential for a conflict of interest and the clear failure, as we have seen here, to provide the best advice?

Will the Government consider legislating to prevent ground rents being doubled every 10 years? Will they intervene to give some hope to those now saddled with the eye-watering commitments that nobody—not the developers, not the lawyers and not the Government—warned them about? Will the Minister consider withdrawing and recouping taxpayer subsidies to any development found to be ripping off householders in this way? Will the Government ensure that there is greater transparency at every stage of the process, with purchasers receiving clear information about the arrangements they are entering into?

Finally, I would like to pass on the following message to anyone listening today. If you are looking to buy a new home built by Taylor Wimpey, Bellway or any other developer, look very carefully at the terms that are offered and ensure that you receive independent legal advice. My message to the developers themselves is to act transparently and offer leasehold only where it is strictly necessary.

2.28 pm

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): My interest in this important topic stems from two long-running cases in my constituency. They relate to two right-to-manage properties housing mainly elderly and retired residents: Elim Court and Regent Court. My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who is also interested in the matter, has given me an enormous amount of advice, for which I am grateful. I also want to thank Rebecca Cattermole and Martin Boyd for all their help in preparing me for today’s debate; I have no doubt they will mark me out of 10 when I have concluded.
I should declare an interest. I still have an interest in a company I set up, which gives property developers advice on how to manage public consultation. I also own a leasehold in my constituency, and I am delighted to say that the other leaseholders and I own the management company. I think we manage the whole thing very well indeed.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West on securing this incredibly important debate. I also thank them for their stewardship of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform.

The Elim Court case has attracted national attention to right-to-manage law. Elim Court’s RTM company, which was established for this purpose, made an application to acquire the right to manage a block of flats at Elim Terrace in Plymouth under part 2 of the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002. The Act created a no-fault right to manage, under which, on satisfaction of some preconditions, a qualifying majority of tenants of a building containing leasehold flats can establish an RTM company to take over management of the building from their landlord. The no-fault part of the Act meant they did not have to show fault in the way the building was managed.

Elim’s landlord declined to participate in the RTM process and opposed it through the Leasehold Valuation Tribunal—now more commonly known as the first-tier tribunal—which accepted his arguments on a technicality. On appeal, the decision was upheld, and the case thrown out. My constituents in Elim Court have been battling for years for the right to manage their property. The legal system that was put in place in 2002, while welcome, is in desperate need of vast improvement.

This really is the tip of the iceberg. Since its inception in 2002, the right to manage has proved popular with leaseholders who want to take control of badly managed blocks. However, it is an over-complicated scheme, riven with pitfalls and technicalities that are difficult to overcome without sound legal advice. I have been told that gaping holes have emerged in the 2002 legislation that need to be addressed urgently due to the increase in RTM applications and to landlords refusing to release their tight grasp on highly lucrative management arrangements, while finding every possible loophole to thwart applications by leaseholders and residents. That is an abhorrent way to treat anyone, let alone the retired and the elderly.

A further issue that Elim Court and Regent Court have encountered is the high costs involved in tribunals and appeals, which have, indeed, become something of a cash cow for lawyers. The fact that RTM is so plagued by loopholes means that the no-fault basis on which leaseholders can obtain the right to manage is proving costly. Currently, Elim Court is awaiting a hearing at the Court of Appeal—as I explained earlier, the process has been highly expensive. If the residents were to walk away now, they would be set to lose between £25,000 and £30,000—a very large amount.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Through my hon. Friend, may I suggest that the Law Officers look to see whether they can take over the case and carry it forward at public expense? If this is a question of justice and law, it is about time Justice Ministers got involved.

Oliver Colvile: I thoroughly agree, and I thank my hon. Friend for giving such clear advice, as he generally does.

I would now like to go into further detail about the Regent Court case. In 2012, during severe storms in Plymouth, the roof blew off the building. No insurance claim was paid, leaving the leaseholder with a staggering £114,000 bill. The insurance company, AXA, claimed that the condition of the roof previously would have voided the policy, prompting the landlord to seek to recover £140,000 from the leaseholders—more than the bill for the roof repairs.

After much investigation, the ombudsman has only just reached its wholly unsatisfactory decision, declining to investigate whether there was a fault in the claims-handling process, because the insurance company had asked it not to. It remains unclear whether the landlord withdrew the claim or it was withdrawn because it was disputed. What I have learned recently is that the loss adjuster’s report may have missed key information that would have meant that the claim should have been paid out to the leaseholders.

The case illustrates that leaseholders have few rights if the insurance company and the freeholder do not want a matter investigated. Again, elderly residents are being treated in this way. Regent Court is a particularly shocking case, as the landlord has not had an interest in managing the building since the second half of 2013, when the leaseholders took control via their RTM company.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The House is following this case keenly. Is my hon. Friend telling the House that the freeholder had the responsibility to make sure the roof was maintained, but did not, and that he had the responsibility to deal with the insurance, but it was apparently not valid or he was not going to claim on it? The leaseholder therefore failed doubly—in terms of the cost of the roof and the cost of the insurance.

Oliver Colvile: That is exactly the position, and it certainly needs to be looked at.

The ombudsman’s decision highlights the fact that millions of leaseholders face the same position across the country. Some landlords also happen to own an insurance broker, as we heard earlier, creating loopholes and conflicts of interest across the board. The Financial Conduct Authority is fully aware that leasehold building insurance is a problem and has reported that high commissions—up to 40%—have been paid on insurance. In 2014, the Competition and Markets Authority investigated leasehold property management, and one of its specific recommendations was that the FCA should look into the matter.

I would like to see a more flexible, more transparent and less complicated system for RTM, insurance issues and service charges for leasehold properties. The current system has been picked apart by lawyers, and the original Act is not fit for purpose. I urge the Government to relook at leasehold and commonhold reform and to sit down and realise that possibly millions of people across the country face very real blockades, when all they want to do is manage their own property—a right this Parliament gave them almost 15 years ago.
To conclude, it seems almost unfathomable that we expect pensioners to cope with some of our most complex legislation. If we in Parliament do not understand the process, and officials do not understand the process, why on earth should we expect these elderly consumers to? It may be too late for the residents of Elim Court and Regent Court, although I am keen to pursue those issues, but we owe it to future leaseholders to ensure that they are not swindled out of hundreds of thousands of pounds by greedy landlords and cowboy insurance companies.

Of course, I want to hear about exorbitant charges for capital works on common parts, with little advice on how to pay. Too often, sadly, local authority landlords are some of the worst culprits in this regard. Perhaps all MPs represent leaseholders of one category or another. As we have heard, many MPs have examples from their casework of issues that have been brought to this debate. Too often, leasehold property sells buyers short at every step.

Those are not my words; they were in an excellent article in a paper I do not usually read—the Daily Mail—in September 2015. Leaseholders are finding problems they had not expected when they bought their home. I think that “duped” was the word used by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston. Those are some of the examples that we have heard about: managing agents imposing arbitrary and multiple charges; lack of transparency of service charges that are way overpriced; estate owners such as those mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse having no right to a tribunal on charges; unexplained and unforeseen increases year on year—sadly, in my experience in Brentford, housing associations are sometimes among the worst culprits; and the cost of extending leases when they drop below the 70-year, or even 60-year, period. I was pleased to learn a bit more about hedonic regression from the hon. Member for Worthing West; I thank him for that.

We have heard about exorbitant charges for capital works on common parts, with little advice on how to pay. Too often, sadly, local authority landlords are some of the worst culprits in this regard.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise to the House for being unable to be here for the start of the debate. May I offer my hon. Friend another example that demonstrates why the leasehold system needs reform? The residents of Platinum House, owned by Luke and Brian Comer, in my constituency have sought to secure the right to manage, yet the owners have used a whole series of tricks to delay the exercise of that right. Does she think that is a further example of the need for reform?

Ruth Cadbury: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent additional example where the right to manage has been proved not to be as simple and straightforward as it should be. Too many people who want to manage their property collectively with their neighbours are finding it too difficult and costly with too many hurdles.

We have seen many complicated hurdles put in the way of leaseholders exercising their right to manage or the right to enfranchise. Dispute resolution procedures are complicated and costly. Lessees are having to pay the landlord’s legal costs. Resale charges are up to 20%, which then suppresses resale values. I ought to declare an interest in that this happens particularly in the retirement sector, and my mother has just bought a flat in a retirement community. There are the questionable tie-ups between freeholders and managing agents, and the solicitors they recommend, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston. There is the scandal of lease forfeiture, again brought to the debate by the hon. Member for Worthing West. New homes on their own plots are being sold by volume housebuilders on 999-year leases when they could be freeholdings. Despite advice given to many first-time buyers in these instances, I must say that no, 999-year leases and freeholds are not one and the same thing.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Another illustration of this issue comes from a CBRE report of 2013 saying that some people who are developing property with leaseholds are now selling the freehold in advance so that they escape the responsibility of offering it to the leaseholders after two years.

Ruth Cadbury: That is yet another example of poor practice—and that would be a generous term.

We have heard about the difficulties of people who buy park homes. They often do this because they cannot afford bricks and mortar, and park homes look, on the surface, to be an affordable option. We have heard about the charges on owner-occupiers for the “privilege” of modifying their own home, even if they
have planning permission. We have heard about buyers who want to purchase the freehold finding it incredibly difficult to do so; some big-name volume housebuilders such as Taylor Wimpey and Bellway have been mentioned. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) raised that matter.

Finally, and perhaps most shocking of all, there is the scandal of what I call the ground rent scam whereby a new asset class has been created as ground rents rise and rise, and properties are being treated as a marketable commodity over the heads of the owner-occupiers. Several hon. Members have mentioned this shocking situation. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston described this national scandal as the PPI of the housebuilding industry.

I am looking forward to the Minister’s response. Before he thinks of saying that the examples brought here today from Members across the House are exceptions that prove the rule, I want to say that they are all too common. The APPG is a new group that has a large membership. A recent survey by LEASE, the Government’s agent, showed that 53% of leaseholders regret their purchase. If there are 4 million leaseholders in this country, and that is probably an underestimate, then 53% of 4 million represents an awful lot of people. Legislation has been changed to benefit far fewer than 2 million people.

Before the Minister thinks of talking about weighing up the relevant benefits to different parties as an excuse to delay radical change and review, I have to ask him whether it is right that people can buy and sell freehold interests and ground rents as a lucrative tradeable asset. The Leasehold Knowledge Partnership suggests that developers alone are now earning an additional £300 million to £500 million a year from ground rent reversionary sales of their head leases and freeholds—and that does not include the buyers and sellers of ground rent funds, such as Ground Rents Income Fund plc, whose website I visited earlier today. This asset class is one of the highest-performing investments for canny investors. I think that following this debate we know why.

Yet hard-working people—those who are doing the right thing by investing their hard-earned cash into buying a home—are being ripped off left, right and centre. The Government must act urgently to stop this gross exploitation of hard-working homeowners who are finding that they cannot sell their homes. In fact, the Government must do more than that. The Labour Government introduced commonhold in the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who is here, was a key player in that. Commonhold works in the rest of the world—for example, in Ireland and in most of our ex-colonies—and it could work in the UK. Labour introduced the Act, but we accept that it is unfinished business. The Government should review it, consider amending it, and implement the necessary changes.

We call on the Government immediately to stop the scandal of exploding ground rents, which is the biggest legitimate scam in Britain. They should review how commonhold works and make it work, and also end leasehold tenure. We strongly argue that we need to update, consolidate and simplify all the legislation, not just add another Bill and yet more complexity. The Government should consider revising the law on replacing leasehold forfeiture, as the Law Commission has recommended. We ask the Government to consider proper regulation of managing agents and to simplify the right to manage, so that residents are able jointly to take control of the block in which they live.

**Sir Peter Bottomley**: We need to make it much easier for any individual leaseholder to have access to the contact details of every other leaseholder, not just tenants, so that they can apply for their rights. At the moment, for all sorts of bad reasons, they are blocked from being able to do that. I hope that the Government hear what the hon. Lady is saying and that they will work out practical ways to make things easy.

**Ruth Cadbury**: The Government need to look at that detailed and critical issue. We look forward to not just an acknowledgement of the issues, but a solid commitment from the Minister to look at them. To date, the Government have shown no sense of urgency, just half-hearted promises to end the problem.

Reform of leasehold law is “unfinished business”, in the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne. There are too many loopholes in too many pieces of legislation, and the balance of power remains with the freeholder and their agents.

A Labour Government would give leaseholders security against rip-off ground rents and end the routine use of leasehold ownership in new developments. Will this Government do that? Labour will cap ground rent charges and set out a plan to end their routine use. We need a clear commitment from the Government. We all owe that to the millions of leaseholders in this country, for now and for the future.

2.52 pm

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell)**: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this really important debate. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting their request. Both hon. Members have shown over the years a real dedication to leasehold reform, and I appreciate their advocacy not only for their constituents, but for prospective and existing leaseholders across the country.

As we have heard, there are more than 4 million leasehold homes in England. That figure represents an important and significant proportion of the housing market. It is also a growing proportion of the housing market: 43% of all new build registrations in England and Wales in 2016 were leasehold.

**Jim Fitzpatrick**: I apologise for intervening on the Minister so early in his speech; we look forward to hearing what he has to say. May I remind him that it was campaigning by LKP and others that got the DCLG to review the figure and change it from 2.1 million to 4.1 million? The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) has already called for a statistical review, because LKP thinks that the figure is closer to 5.5 million and might even be higher. The number to which the Minister refers, which is a significant part of the housing market, may be even bigger.


**Gavin Barwell**: The hon. Gentleman makes his point forcefully. Whatever the actual figure—clearly, the work that was done resulted in the increase to which he refers—I think we can all agree that it is a significant part of the housing market, particularly in Greater London, which he and I have the privilege of representing.

Leasehold legislation has been amended on many occasions over the past 50 years to improve leaseholder rights, including the right to extend their lease, appoint a new manager, challenge unreasonable service charges and purchase the freehold. All of that legislation has helped, but it clearly has not solved the problem, which is probably a lesson for all of us. Why has it not solved the problem? I think that we can point to two clear things. First, the legislation is seen by many as complex, as a number of hon. Members have said, and that can cause problems for leaseholders and freeholders alike. Secondly—the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who spoke on behalf of the Opposition, referred to this—the 2016 national leasehold survey showed that 57% of leaseholders either somewhat or strongly agree with the statement:

“From my experience, buying a leasehold property is a pretty sobering statistic.”

We should accept at the outset that, whatever changes we make to the law, and whatever system we have for managing properties where a number of people have an interest in the land, some tension is inevitable. Even in those countries that have a commonhold system, some people in a particular block of flats might be keen for further improvements to be made, while others, who might be more financially challenged, might be more nervous about their service charge bills.

The hon. Lady said that she was concerned that I was going to respond by saying that the concerns that we have heard are just exceptions that do not represent the real problem. I assure her that the leasehold survey shows that they are not exceptions and that there is a widespread problem that needs to be addressed. I was asked directly whether I felt comfortable with the current situation. I assure hon. Members that I most certainly do not feel comfortable with the level of concern right across the Chamber. Indeed, I am very keen to explore how we can promote greater transparency and fairness, and to work with all interested parties to improve leaseholders’ experience of home ownership.

This is a timely debate because it has highlighted concerns that others have raised, including the Law Commission as part of its consultation on the 13th programme of law reform. We are working closely with the commission and will use the examples raised today in our discussions with it.

I want to consider the issue of houses being sold as leasehold, which my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) have mentioned. Leasehold has been a part of the housing market in this country for decades, even centuries. In the right circumstances, with the right safeguards, it can serve both leaseholders and freeholders well. As we have heard today, however, that is often not the case.

Analysis by LKP suggests that nearly 9,000 houses were built and sold last year as leasehold. Some have no shared services or estate management functions. In fact, they seem to exist only to create a reliable income stream from the ground rent, permissions to alter the property, and selling on the freehold at some point in the future. Developers can maximise their return by selling the freehold interest to the leaseholder at a higher value after they have moved in, or by selling it to a third party without informing the leaseholder. That is a critical point: if a freeholder wishes to sell a leasehold flat, the leaseholder has the right of first refusal, but that right does not extend to those in leasehold houses.

Those practices are not illegal, but it seems to me, and to the Secretary of State, to be one of those cases where there is a gulf between the letter of the law and our sense of what is right. Some of the cases that we have seen in the media and heard about today have highlighted some truly appalling behaviour. The Secretary of State and I have been looking closely at the issues raised in recent weeks and we are both absolutely determined to stamp out unfair, unjust and unacceptable abuse of the leasehold system.

A number of references have been made to Taylor Wimpey’s announcement that it will address some of our concerns about its use of leasehold. I am keen to hear more about what it plans to do, not just to stop such practices in the future, but to help homeowners who are currently stuck with ground rents rising much faster than inflation. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston made that point powerfully. The leaseholder does not have to be very far into the lease in order to be stuck with that problem, which relates not necessarily to their actual payments at that point in time, but to their ability either to extend the lease or to sell the property to someone else.

**Justin Madders**: It is welcome that this practice is not going to continue, but my constituents are anxious to know what the Government can do to deal with the onerous conditions that exist in leases already.

**Gavin Barwell**: I do not have an answer for the hon. Gentleman today, but I assure him that the Secretary of State and I are looking into this issue. We are very clear that it is not just a matter of stopping this practice; we must also address the situation of hard-working people who believe that they have bought their home, but who may find themselves unable to sell that home down the line. I give the hon. Gentleman the clear assurance that we are looking at the issue.

**Sir Peter Bottomley**: May I ask the Minister to consult his officials and others on whether there is scope for declaring such a condition to be an unfair term and having it written out?

**Gavin Barwell**: There are a number of different ways in which the issue can be addressed. It is a difficult issue, because although the clear mood in the House is that the practice is unfair, it none the less interacts with the property rights of the freeholder, and those rights have some protection under the European convention on human rights. We need to think about the right way to address the problem. I will certainly reflect on the suggestion that my hon. Friend has made, and other suggestions have been made during the debate.

We should not be under any illusions. The problem does not just concern one company; a number of our larger developers are involved in it. They would do well...
to remember that they are building homes for people to live in, not investment vehicles for financial institutions. Except in a very few exceptional circumstances, I cannot think of any good reason for houses to be built on a leasehold basis. If the industry does not put a stop to the practice and help existing homeowners, we will look to see what Government can do.

Historically, ground rents were set at around one thousandth of the lease value, sometimes increasing every 25 or 33 years. They existed only to create a contract between the freeholder and the leaseholder. However, in recent years, ground rent levels for new leases have increased, as has the frequency of increases. Research by Direct Line suggested that the average ground rent is now £371 for new builds and £327 for older properties.

My immediate concern is the level and frequency of increases in ground rents. We have heard today about one developer selling a lease with a ground rent starting at just under £300 in 2011 and doubling each decade for 50 years, so that by 2061 the annual cost will reach almost £9,500. The purchaser was not made aware of the escalation by their solicitor, who was recommended by the developer. The purchaser is now unable to sell the property, and the cost of extending the lease or buying the freehold is prohibitive.

Of course, there is a degree of caveat emptor when we buy a new house, but we all know that our housing market is a seller's market at the moment and the advantage lies firmly with the developer. Just because they can sell desperate people something does not mean that they should be doing so. Institutional and other investors increasingly see ground rents as an alternative to equities and bonds, but leaseholders see no return or value in ground rents, especially when they can rise to onerous levels. Obviously, Members on both sides of the House welcome institutional investment into our housing market, but I would much rather institutional investors put their money into productive projects instead of just hoovering up ground rents because they are seen as a safe bet. Both this House and the Government want to hear more from the developers about what they are going to do to put the situation right.

I turn briefly to commonhold, although Members will probably be aware that the Ministry of Justice is the lead Department for this matter. Commonhold was intended to be a voluntary alternative to long leasehold ownership. As we heard from the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth, it was introduced by the last Labour Government in 2002 with good intentions, but it has had very limited take-up. There are several explanations as to why. Developers have not favoured the model, and leaseholders have found it a complicated process. Commonhold can be created only where all the owners of the land in question agree to its creation, so it is for developers to decide whether to build commonhold, or for everyone with a shared interest in an existing block to agree to convert to commonhold and to agree their commonhold community statement.

I know that several Members have pressed strongly for commonhold and continue to do so, arguing that it is a better alternative to leasehold arrangements. Commonhold is one way forward in considering improvements for leaseholders, but we also need to look at what we can do to change the existing system. There have been calls for responsibility for commonhold to be transferred from the Ministry of Justice to my Department. That would require a machinery of government change, and it has been agreed with Ministers that we will have a look at that in the new year.

I hope I have made it clear that the Government accept that there is a lot to do in this area. If the House will forgive me, I would like to say a few words about the things we have already done to improve matters and to ensure that there is easy access to remedies when things go wrong. In the Housing and Planning Act 2016, we introduced two important measures to help leaseholders to exercise their rights and to ensure that they are not ripped off by unscrupulous landlords. Members will probably be familiar with the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, which allows a tenants association made up of “qualifying tenants” to seek statutory recognition. Such recognition provides the tenants association with additional rights over and above those enjoyed by individual leaseholders, including, crucially, the right to be consulted about the appointment of managing agents, to be notified of works proposed by the landlord and to receive copies of estimates.

Ruth Cadbury: I am grateful to the Minister for pointing out the right to be consulted under the Housing and Planning Act 2016. Does that extend to the right to have a veto?

Gavin Barwell: The 2016 Act does not give a right to veto, but it gives improved powers to residents associations. Groups have had some difficulties in exercising those powers. If the hon. Lady will give me a second, I will try to explain what we seek to achieve.

Section 130 of the 2016 Act will make a big difference to residents associations, which are finding it difficult to obtain the number of members needed to help them to apply for statutory recognition and the additional rights that that brings. It will do so by requiring a landlord to supply to the secretary of a residents association information that would allow contact to be made with absent leaseholders for the purposes of increasing the association’s membership and therefore its likelihood of achieving recognition.

Another important aspect of the Housing and Planning Act 2016, concerns a landlord’s recovery of litigation costs from leaseholders as administrative charges, which the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse raised. He gave a pretty horrific example from his constituency of how that is being abused in a particular case. At present, where a lease allows a landlord to recover the costs of legal proceedings through the service charge, a court or tribunal can decide to restrict the amount that can be recovered in that way. Courts or tribunals do not have similar powers where recovery of the costs of proceedings as an administration charge is permitted by the lease.

Jim Fitzpatrick indicated assent.

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Gentleman is nodding; that is the situation in the case that he mentioned. That can lead to unfairness, because the leaseholder will have no choice but to pay the costs of proceedings as an administration charge, regardless of the proceedings. That discourages leaseholders from exercising their rights to challenge the amount of a service charge, particularly as the landlord’s costs in the proceedings could well exceed
the amount that is being disputed. The commencement planned early in the new year of section 131 of the Housing and Planning Act will enable the tribunal or court to consider, on application by the leaseholder, whether it is reasonable for a landlord to recover all or part of those costs.

The complicated nature of leasehold can make it challenging for people to ensure that they follow the correct legal procedures. To help leaseholders to navigate through the system, the Government provide access to free, independent legal advice and information through the leasehold advisory service, or LEASE, as it is known. My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West referred to it in his speech. Last year, Government provided LEASE with more than £1 million of funding, and 850,000 people across the country benefited from free advice.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): May I, through the Minister, thank LEASE for all the work that it does to help my constituents, and for always being willing to attend residents’ meetings to give advice when people feel all at sea about this complicated area?

Gavin Barwell: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. It is good that people are paying tribute to LEASE for the important work that it does, and which I know is very much valued by people right across the country.

I want to reassure the House that the Government remain committed to ensuring leaseholders have the best professional advice available to them. Given its increasingly important role, I want to make sure that LEASE is properly equipped to offer help to everybody who needs it. Particularly in the light of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West, we will look again at how it works, its funding model and its membership.

In conclusion, this well-informed debate has raised important issues affecting millions of people in this country. We take all the issues raised very seriously, as I hope has been indicated by the tone of my speech. We have a strong interest in making sure that the system works as effectively as possible, and we are looking at suggestions for alternative systems, but this issue clearly needs attention. The motion states that the House “has considered” this issue, and I want to reassure my hon. Friend that it will be considered by the Government and that we will come back in the new year with proposals on how to tackle it.

3.11 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick: This has been an important debate. We have had fewer contributions than we expected when we put in a bid for this space at the Backbench Business Committee, but it is reassuring that so many colleagues have come into the Chamber to listen to the Minister’s winding-up speech. They recognise that this is an important issue, and they therefore wanted to hear what he had to say. Perhaps that will reassure him about his popularity: he did not realise it was quite as widespread as it is.

The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) comprehensively exposed the abuses and he named names. He said this goes “beyond sleaze”. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said this is the PPI scandal of the property sector. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) talked about the unfairness in the system. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), quoted the Daily Mail. She said it is not her usual read, but even the Daily Mail gets some things right occasionally, which is reassuring. She gave many examples of poor, shoddy and criminal practices, and on behalf of the official Opposition she made several commitments on leasehold and commonhold. We heard interventions from the hon. Members for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) and for Bolton West (Chris Green), and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas), who gave examples of problems in their constituencies.

I thank the Minister for his response, including his declaration that he is uncomfortable with the current situation. He said that there is “a gulf between the letter of the law and…what is right”.

He indicated that he will look at this issue in the new year and do something about it, and we welcome the promises he has made on behalf of himself and of the Secretary of State.

The all-party group will continue to campaign on this issue. We look forward to engaging with the Minister and his civil servants, as we have during the past year. We intend to engage with the Government not only to examine and address the abuses and anomalies in the system, but to put the position straight. On behalf of the all-party group, the hon. Member for Worthing West and I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all colleagues, as well as all the staff of the House, a very happy Christmas and a decent break. We look forward to 2017, when leasehold and commonhold will be back on the agenda.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Thank you, and may I return the compliment of the hon. Gentleman and the House by wishing everybody a very happy Christmas and a good new year?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered leasehold and commonhold reform.
Christmas Adjournment

3.14 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

I rise to speak on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee. Unaccountably, I must apologise for the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who is unable to be with us this afternoon; he is no doubt very active in his constituency, regaling his constituents with festive wishes.

The theme of my introduction is thinking about those who are less fortunate than we are. First and foremost, I want to place on the record what I believe is the view of the whole House in expressing our horror and revulsion at the events at the Berlin Christmas market. Our thoughts are not only with those who are fighting for their lives, but with the relatives of those who have sadly lost their lives. It just shows what can happen and the horrors that can ensue at a simple Christmas market where law-abiding people are going about their business. We do not yet know who was responsible or what their motives were. However, our sympathies are with the relatives of those who have lost their lives and equally with those who have been severely injured.

Secondly, let us express our thoughts, as a whole House, for the people of Aleppo, who are in a parlous condition at the hands of a brutal dictator, and a brutal army that is basically eliminating anyone and everyone that stands in its way. I trust that there will be a resolution of this terrible conflict in the new year, and that people will be able to return to their homes in peace and harmony.

Thirdly, this is the first Christmas that Jo Cox’s family will experience without her. Members on both sides of the House have been touched by the brutal murder of a colleague who was just doing her job on behalf of her constituents. The best thing we can all do—even if we are not used to downloading tracks—is to download her single and help to make it the No. 1 for Christmas. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will know all too well that my Homelessness Reduction Bill is making its way through Parliament. I am delighted to say that it has all-party support. It had an unopposed Second Reading on 28 October, and we have pursued the Bill in Committee, where I am pleased to say that we are more than halfway through its 13 clauses. I am told that it is the longest ever private Member’s Bill, and it will probably end up as the most expensive for the Government to fund.

Equally, the Bill is very important. The number of people who are homeless in this country is a disgrace, and the number of people who will sleep rough tonight is a disgrace. We owe it to them to make sure that we deliver a radical solution. First and foremost, that is about increasing the supply of housing so that people can have a decent roof over their head, but it is also about transforming local authorities to make sure that they look at the reasons why people are homeless and provide help and assistance at first hand.

I want to thank some of the people involved. I place on the record my thanks to Crisis, St Mungo’s and Shelter for all the work they do to assist people who are homeless at this time of year. I also thank them for giving me tremendous support in producing the Bill, together with the National Landlords Association, which has also given me exceptional assistance.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Given that it is Christmas and that the hon. Gentleman has raised the subject of housing, will he take this opportunity to join me in praising Harrow Council for beginning to build council houses—for the first time in 28 years, there will be new council homes in Harrow—which is surely a key part of tackling the housing crisis that affects both our constituencies?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is my constituency neighbour, for raising that issue. It is important that affordable housing is developed right across London and right across the country. To me, the form of tenure does not matter too much; what matters most is that housing is provided for people at a price they can afford. It is good to see Harrow Council doing something right under Labour control. That is very rare—I have a whole catalogue of its errors. But in the spirit of Christmas, let us thank the council.

May I also place on the record my concern and that of more than 216 Members of Parliament about the plight of Equitable Life policyholders? It is a long-running scandal. Although the Government have now closed the compensation scheme to new applicants, the issue is far from over. The Government rightly provided £1.5 billion in compensation to people who suffered from the scam, but the former Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), made it clear that the total sum owed to those people—as a result of saving their money, as was their right, for a reasonable retirement—was £4.3 billion. More than 1 million people have received only 22% of the compensation they are due. A great deal of money still needs to be found to compensate those applicants. That is without dealing with the most frail and vulnerable—those with pre-92 trapped annuities, who deserve help on compassionate grounds. I am glad that the new Economic Secretary has agreed to meet a cross-party delegation in the new year to discuss the next steps.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The Equitable Life policyholders are getting older. It matters that we get this sorted.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. Quite clearly, in the not too distant future large numbers of those affected will want to use their pension for the comfortable life they thought they were saving for and have literally been robbed of.

This year, we have resuscitated the all-party parliamentary group on Romania. I particularly want to raise the plight of Alexander Adamescu, a journalist from Romania—originally from Germany—who is resident in the UK and is under threat from a European arrest warrant for raising issues that are slightly controversial in Romania but in this country would not be an issue. That raises
specific concerns about the relationship between Britain and Romania, and about how the European arrest warrant is used.

I also want to raise the plight of 1.5 million people displaced in Azerbaijan from the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict there has been going on for far too long. It is a forgotten conflict, and unfortunately the position with Armenia, Russia and allies has not helped the overall situation. This summer, the all-party parliamentary group on Azerbaijan went to see one of the camps that has been set up for those people. They are suffering very greatly through no fault of their own. It is time that human rights and shared values were restored to that part of the world.

There is unfinished business in Parliament on two other issues that I will raise briefly. First, we have now gone a year since the expiry of the tobacco control plan that the Government implemented. We have been waiting a year for the new plan. We have been promised on frequent occasions that it would be published soon. On today’s Order Paper I see no progress on it, and I do not think the issue was aired at Health questions. It is obviously important that the Government publish the new tobacco control plan early in the new year, with far-reaching targets, so that we can set out our stall to make sure that the United Kingdom becomes a smoke-free country. It is important that the plan is set out, because without it we run the risk of going backwards on all the wonderful things that have been achieved over the past five years.

Equally, on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group for British Hindus I want to raise the fact that the Government have promised on several occasions to publish the consultation document on ridding ourselves of the unnecessary, ill-thought-out and divisive caste legislation. That consultation was promised by the end of the year. Today is the last day this year that we will meet in Parliament, and there has been no notification to Parliament about the publication of that consultation document. I trust that we will see the document before the end of the year, but Parliament should see it and it should be announced in Parliament before it is released to the public.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for all his work on behalf of the Hindu community, not just in Harrow but throughout the country? He and I compete as to the number of British Hindus in our constituencies, although I probably just beat him in Leicester. Does he agree that it is important that we have a debate on that document once it is published? It is not sufficient just to publish and rush it through the House. A proper debate involving the diaspora would be very helpful.

Bob Blackman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that point. I have asked at the last two Women and Equalities questions for the publication of the consultation and asked at business questions for a statement to the House. We could have that debate and Members from all parties and with all interests could register their point of view. Sadly, that has yet to be the case. It is important that we have the debate before the consultation starts, so that it can frame the consultation rather than ending up responding to the document.

I will raise a couple more issues of significance before I conclude my opening speech. The first is the problems that I am sure Members in all parts of the House are experiencing with regard to the issuing of visas for weddings, religious ceremonies and educational or other particular purposes. Visas are being rejected on grounds that I consider spurious. That causes immense difficulties for people coming for religious functions, weddings and in particular funerals, where things are done at the last minute. Applications from India, Pakistan, Iran and Sri Lanka seem to be singled out in an unfair manner and are not treated properly.

I will continue to work in the new year for a two-year visitor visa to be issued for Indian citizens in the same way as the Government agreed for Chinese citizens. I have nothing against Chinese people wanting to visit—that is wonderful—but huge numbers of Indians want to come here and visit too, and I see no reason why they should suffer unfair discrimination when so many relatives are here and people want to visit and to use this country appropriately.

Local transport services are suffering. This may be a theme of other speeches in this debate. We are looking forward to Harrow-on-the-Hill station in the constituency of my honourable neighbour the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) being made step-free. I am looking forward to Stanmore station becoming step-free in the same timeframe. I trust that the solution that has been identified will go forward and will be appropriate.

The one local health issue that I want to raise is that we are seeing the rebuilding of the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital in my constituency. That is not before time. I and my predecessors have struggled to achieve that and I am delighted that it is finally happening and that we will see the development of a first-rate national hospital that suits the brilliant work that the doctors and nurses do.

I could raise a range of other issues, but I know that a huge number of colleagues are keen to update the House on what they think matters before we rise for the Adjournment. I look forward to the response of my good friend the Deputy Leader of the House to the debate in time-honoured fashion. I have no doubt that it will be appropriately challenging for him, but I know that he will respond and that colleagues will have suitable matters to raise.

Mr Deputy Speaker. I wish you, the Speaker, your fellow Deputy Speakers, the whole House, our colleagues, the staff and the people who keep us safe a very merry Christmas and a happy new year that I trust will be peaceful, prosperous and healthy. On behalf of the Backbench Business Committee, I open the debate and look forward to the speeches of hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If hon. Members take up to eight minutes, everyone will—[Interruption.] It is no use moaning about it. If you want to take extra and knock someone else out, that is up to yourselves. I am only trying to be helpful. In the Christmas spirit, let us all treat each other with equality.
3.30 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I would like to add to the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) at the beginning of his speech about the sad incident in Germany, and especially those comments in relation to the memory of our dear friend Jo Cox.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), a fellow member of the drugs, alcohol and justice parliamentary group, asked on the day of the summer Adjournment:

“Will the Leader of the House send out a search party to find the updated drugs strategy, as it has gone missing in Government?”—[Official Report, 21 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 984.]

The policy is still awaited, and unless we have an unexpected delivery from Father Christmas, it will not be seen in the coming months.

In September, I suggested that a debate was desperately needed on drugs policy, following a series of related reports. The Health Committee’s report on public health warned that “cuts to public health are a false economy” and expressed concern that drug and alcohol services “can get missed.” Then came an update from the Office for National Statistics showing drugs deaths at record levels; my area, the north-east of England, was the highest again. At the same time, Public Health England and the Local Government Association published their detailed investigation into drug deaths. This month, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has added its investigation.

Furthermore, we have seen Public Health England’s “Evidence Review of the Public Health Burden of Alcohol and the Effectiveness and Cost-Effectiveness of Alcohol Control Policies”, and the Department of Work and Pensions has finally released Dame Carol Black’s review of the effects of drug and alcohol addiction on employment outcomes. All this weight of expert opinion and evidence recommends that we prioritise drug and alcohol treatment. I very much hope that the Government heed the evidence and recommendations from all these reports and provide a drugs strategy and an alcohol strategy with the resources required to fulfil their objectives.

As Karen Tyrell, a regular contributor to the drugs, alcohol and justice group Addaction, said:

“We simply can’t allow another year to go by and greet further deaths with another statement of concern.”

Two other parliamentary groups to which I belong, the Fire Brigades Union parliamentary group and the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and rescue, have raised the issue of school sprinklers, for which guidance is being revised. I am in favour of clear, concise guidance, but I am not in favour of children possibly losing their schools, or even their lives, for the sake of losing a few lines of text. We cannot prioritise brevity over safety. I hope that in the new year, Education Ministers will reconsider and restore the expectation that sprinklers will be installed in new school buildings. Surely, if any change must be made it would be better to replace the word “expectation” with a firm duty to install sprinklers.

Finally, I am dismayed and disappointed that the Government have allowed Spanish-owned Scottish Power to take huge concessions from the UK taxpayer yet award the majority of its fabrication contracts to Spanish nationally owned yards and yards in the middle east. Only 200 UK jobs will be created in Northern Ireland under the contract to build jackets for the East Anglia One offshore wind farm project.

It is very worrying that Government officials omitted to stipulate reference to UK content in the subsidy documents—shame on our Government and shame on Scottish Power! A portion of those jobs would have been lifeblood for the OGN yard in my constituency, which at the height of its contracts two years ago supported 2,000 jobs. As jobs have dried up, the yard has just a handful of people to maintain it. I must praise Dennis Clark of OGN for his past success in bringing good jobs to North Tyneside and for his solid commitment to our region. Our fight will go on to ensure our yards in Tyneside have healthy order books in future.

I wish everyone who works in the House a very happy Christmas and, in particular, the most precious gift of all: good health throughout 2017.

3.36 pm

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I would like to spread some Christmas cheer by talking about the tax system, but first I would like to join others in wishing you, Mr Deputy Speaker, all right hon. and hon. Members and all staff of the House well for the Christmas period.

I want to detain the House briefly to talk about HMRC’s Making Tax Digital programme, an important issue I think we should reflect on over the Christmas period. Before doing so, I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as a recipient of rental income from property.

Digitisation of the tax system—the aim of the MTD programme—is worth while, but I have genuine concerns about the proposals as they currently stand. I have been contacted by a number of constituents, including Mr Nick Danan, whose email prompted me to make this speech today. A key issue is the proposed obligation, under the programme, to send a quarterly report to the tax authorities. This is to be accompanied by so-called real-time reporting of transactions, although exactly what that will involve in practice is not yet clear.

At the moment, the obligation is planned to be imposed on all self-employed people, small businesses and buy-to-let landlords with an income or turnover above £10,000. A relatively recent concession by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is that implementation will be deferred for a year for unincorporated businesses with a turnover over the £10,000 threshold and below unspecified new thresholds. It is very welcome that HMRC has been listening and that it has made that move, but it does not address all the concerns my constituents have with the proposals.

I welcomed the chance to meet the Federation of Small Businesses when it visited Parliament on 29 November to present a report it had commissioned on the Making Tax Digital programme and to explain the changes it believes ought to be made to the programme before it is put into legislation next year. Yesterday, I met Louise McMullan and Alan Lean of Equity to talk about the problems their members in the entertainment industry would have with the programme. The FSB estimates that the current proposals will cost businesses on average...
Clear believes its system will be successful and easy to use, so it should not shy away from a voluntary approach.

The Chairman of the Treasury Committee pointed out the concern in his letter to the Chancellor in September. He said that the new requirements for digital recordkeeping and reporting go further than simply entering a handful of totals into an online return. In his letter, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie) described what was required as “tantamount to prescription by HMRC, for the first time, of a particular form in which accounting records must be maintained.”

I thus hope that one key thing we will hear from Ministers when they return here next year is clarity on exactly what quarterly real-time reporting will be required by MTD. I hope that the Government will consider my constituent’s proposal that it should not go beyond a simple statement of income on expenditure.

HMRC’s commitment to free digital tools for the smallest businesses to help them with this new approach is welcome, but so far we have had only rather limited information on what that software will be and for how long it will remain free to use. A point raised with me by Equity yesterday is that many of its members are particularly concerned about whether the free software will enable them to report overseas earnings. I hope that we will hear from Ministers next year about their confidence in the security of HMRC systems. People will be asked to accommodate a vast amount of data, far more than at present, and I think people providing those data will want to be confident that HMRC’s computer systems are stable and resilient enough to hold this vast increase.

I also hope that Ministers will be able to reassure us about how the new reporting obligations will compare with universal credit monthly reports. Many in the self-employed sector will receive universal credit and be subject to the Making Tax Digital obligations: avoiding unnecessary duplication would be very helpful. Perhaps most important of all, a longer implementation period with extensive piloting would really help to ease the transition to a genuinely digital tax system. It also makes sense to start with the larger businesses, which are probably better able to cope, rather than, as HMRC currently proposes, starting with the smallest.

The Government were very sensible to pilot the new universal credit system extensively and introduce it gradually over a period of years. Making Tax Digital will be a truly massive IT project, and taking time to get it right is both justifiable and sensible, even if that postpones some of the advantages for the Government. I fear that if HMRC presses ahead with MTD in its current form, that will require a very significant change for thousands of self-employed people who may not run digital accounts, or, in some cases, may not even use computers very much.

Of course there are clear advantages in moving such people towards a more systematic approach to their tax and accounts and away from the so-called shoebox model approach, but if HMRC is to achieve behaviour change of that magnitude, it will take some time. There can be little doubt that millions of people are due to face a radical change in how they deal with their tax affairs, and that they do not yet have a clue about what is coming down the track towards them. Allowing enough
time to enable the delivery of the programme to run smoothly would be a wise choice on the Government’s part.

I believe that most people should welcome and support the goal of a digitised tax system. I have no doubt that a number of elements of HMRC’s Making Tax Digital programme will make the tax system easier to use, help to reduce errors, strengthen the tax base and support the public finances. Those are all aims that the House can support, and I certainly support them, but there are still real concerns about the cost impact of the programme on self-employed people, landlords and small businesses. I believe that those problems can be resolved, but, although there is still time to sort them out, there is not a great deal of time.

I am not someone who rushes to highlight potential risks or problems with Government initiatives, but I felt that I ought to raise these concerns on behalf of the many people in my constituency who will be affected. I believe that those problems can be resolved, but, although there is still time to sort them out, there is not a great deal of time.

Among the numerous issues to have graced my casework over recent months—perhaps one of the more interesting—is the World Health Organisation Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products, sometimes referred to as the Illicit Trade Protocol, or ITP. As many Members will know, the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is the world’s first and only public health treaty. However, the problem of illicit tobacco was held to be so severe that a new, subsidiary treaty under the FCTC was required, namely the ITP. It was concluded in 2012, and currently covers 24 state parties plus the European Union. Forty parties are required for the ITP to come into force. It was signed by the United Kingdom Government three years ago, but so far it has not been ratified by the UK. In recent weeks, I have raised this subject a number of times through parliamentary questions, both oral and written. I am grateful to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury for her helpful and constructive answers, which I received yesterday.

Those who have raised this important issue with me feel that the UK Government are setting a poor example and dragging their feet on ratification of the protocol on illicit tobacco and that as a consequence they are threatening public health and costing the Treasury millions of pounds in lost revenue. The latest HMRC figures for 2015-16 estimate that the UK illicit market share for cigarettes is 13% and for hand-rolling tobacco 32%. The tobacco tax gap for this period was estimated to be £2.4 billion. Although that represents a significant improvement over the last decade or so, the issue remains a key public health concern. I say that not because illicit tobacco is necessarily more harmful than that on sale in shops, but rather because it bypasses tobacco control measures designed to increase prices and prevent tobacco sales to children.

As I have mentioned, I hope that the parliamentary questions and answers go some way towards addressing the concerns over the Government’s failure to act on the ITP. I look forward to the text of the protocol being laid before Parliament as a Command Paper, and would be grateful to Ministers if we could have an indication of a likely timescale for that.

I press the point because I believe that the ITP will genuinely help to tackle the illicit trade problem. Among its measures designed to combat the illicit trade is a worldwide tracking and tracing scheme for tobacco products. The ITP explicitly requires Governments to take responsibility for control measures and not to rely on industry self-regulation, which has failed to deliver. This track-and-trace scheme is intended to prevent the tobacco industry from participating in, or turning a blind eye to, smuggling. The scheme must be independent of the industry if it is to be effective.

Earlier this year, the big tobacco companies sold Codentify, the anti-smuggling track-and-trace system, to a third party for a token 1 Swiss franc, clearly in an attempt to comply with EU and World Health Organisation rules on independence. However, it has been claimed that the new owner is merely a front company and that the system is still under the effective control of the tobacco firms. If so, this would not fulfil the requirements of the ITP for independence. Some industry insiders have also highlighted that Codentify is ineffective as a track-and-trace system as it uses a combination of unique encrypted codes along with other codes that are visible and easy to forge. I trust that Ministers will have that on their radar as this issue moves forward.

In conclusion, the protocol to eliminate illicit trade in tobacco products is a global solution to a global problem. It is important that we play our full part, and in the spirit of Christmas I welcome the Government’s commitment to ratification. I am, however, impatient and keen to see progress. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response, although I will not envy him as he tries to sum up today’s wide-ranging debate.

3.52 pm

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): At this time of Christmas and good will towards all, it seems a bit churlish to bring to the attention of the House the sad problems my constituents have had over the last three weeks when travelling by rail down from Chelmsford to Liverpool Street to work and back again. About 8,000 to 9,000 of my constituents commute to London to work each day, and others travel down to London and back up to Chelmsford during the day for a variety of other reasons. But we have been struck over the last three weeks by one problem after another that have brought the network to a grinding halt and caused so much disruption and frustration for those travelling.
The fact is that in my part of Essex the line is only two lines—one down to London and one up from London. There is little scope if a train breaks down or there are problems with the track except to sort the problem out immediately to get the network running again. When a problem occurs, all the trains back up and wait for a solution. If that happens during the rush hour, we can all imagine the frustration and problems, because people want to get to work; they do not want to be late, as it causes problems with their employers, and they have to put up with all of that too.

These problems have happened too much in the recent past. A track crack brought chaos, and a freight train broke down and brought everything to a standstill. Engines pulling commuter trains have broken down, with all the disturbance and problems that that causes.

Things will be considerably better in the future. I give credit to the previous Labour Government and to this Government for the investment that has been poured in to improve and upgrade the track and to replace the overhead cables from Liverpool Street to Chelmsford and beyond to Colchester and Norwich. That is bringing some improvements now, but it will bring considerable improvements when it is finished because we will have fewer faults. However, that is investment that no one ever sees. If we get new carriages, people obviously immediately notice the differences and the improvement on the previous ones. People do not notice track and infrastructure improvement because it is not in their face, but it is going on.

The franchise that was awarded to Abellio Greater Anglia in the summer is extremely good news for my constituents in so far as the commitment is there to replace all the trains with brand-new ones in 2019-20. The current engines and carriages are 30 years old, so it is no wonder that they break down. They are of a different generation and have different technology, which is old and susceptible to faults. When we get brand-new engines, we will see a significant improvement in performance. In addition, a new station will be built just to the north-east of Chelmsford’s city limits near Beaulieu Park, which will help to unclog the congestion in the town that comes from people driving to the station to get their trains to work during the morning rush hour and then driving back in the afternoon and evening. By the mid-2020s, there will be a 5 km loop track to the north of Witham, allowing fast trains to overtake the slower ones, and an increase in capacity on trains to Liverpool Street.

Jam tomorrow is great, but we need more jam today because my constituents are having to put up with too much disruption. Without wanting to rub it in, they pay quite a lot of their taxed income for the pleasure—if that is the right word—of travelling down to London to work, so I want several things. There is considerable engineering work at the moment, particularly at weekends, simply due to investment in upgrading the infrastructure, but I want an end to the Network Rail inefficiencies that lead to engineering work overrunning into the Monday morning rush hour and causing considerable grief. It is totally avoidable with better planning and organisation. In addition, I want service providers to offer more information when there is disruption or a breakdown, so that customers know exactly what the problem is, why they either cannot get on a train or are stuck on a train and, if possible, roughly how long it will take for the problem to be resolved so that they can continue or start their journey. I am not asking for a lot. Better communication is quite straightforward in this era of social media and other communication systems.

If possible, I would like more work to be done to ensure that the current engines are best maintained to minimise the possibility of breakdowns. I also want fewer freight trains to run during rush hour, when they cause utter chaos if they break down. That is a challenge for now. As I have explained, the challenge for the future is looking good, but there is one thing this Government could do to help the network. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport is shortly going to use money from a £450 million fund for trials of digital signalling for the railways, and pilot areas will be needed. Essex County Council and I, along with other hon. Members, are most anxious that one site where this digital signalling is tested should be the Liverpool Street-Chelmsford-Colchester-Ipswich-Norwich line. I urge the Deputy Leader of the House, who will be responding to this debate, to make the Secretary of State for Transport aware, as I have done, of how important it would be and what a signal it would give in terms of confidence in the system if the Department for Transport were prepared to use that line and rail network as part of the trials of digital signalling, because that is yet another investment that will improve rail travel in this country over the coming years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call Siobhain McDonagh—and Buster.

4 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. By now, hon. Members may have seen my break into the music industry with “National Living Rage”, a Christmas song that I recorded with a number of Labour Members last week. Derided by some, adored by others—my mum—I am delighted that the song has had its desired effect of generating national attention for the serious issue of pay cuts. It has had 40,000 hits on YouTube and been laughed at on everything from “Daily Politics” to Channel 4’s “The Last Leg”, but it has got a serious message out in the public domain by humorous means.

These cuts are being made by some good employers who have made a bad decision when it comes to older, long-standing staff. I want to take a moment to consider the tens of thousands of workers who face a pay cut this Christmas—those families who have to bear the pressure of selling their house or finding another job just to make ends meet. Christmas should be a time of good will to all men and women, but a disappointing roll call of employers are being scrooges this year. Instead of delivering presents, they are serving their loyal, long-standing staff with pay cuts and notices. From B&Q to Marks & Spencer, 2 Sisters Food Group, Waitrose, Caffè Nero and EAT, good employers are getting it wrong, using the introduction of a higher statutory minimum wage as an opportunity to cut total staff pay.

No one in this House should be under any illusion that this is some sort of niche issue—on the contrary, it is affecting residents in every constituency across the country.
country. It is estimated that about 11,000 of the iconic high street retailer Marks & Spencer’s total workforce of 83,000 would be negatively impacted in some way by pay cuts—that is 13% of the workforce adversely affected, almost all of whom are on pre-2002 contracts. Some 2,700 workers will lose more than £1,000 a year, and 700 will lose more than £2,000 a year. Approximately more than half a million people in the retail, restaurant and food manufacturing industries will receive a pay cut—that is about 13% of the total number of workers in those industries. Many of the companies involved are high street names with historically good reputations, but they have made some terrible errors of judgment. It is not too late for them to change their minds, and I am asking all of them to reverse their decisions to cut staff pay at their January board meetings. Should those companies not change their minds, I hope the Government will step in and salvage their policy for all workers.

I have seen evidence that proves that many other companies are planning the same sort of pay cuts in the coming year. The chair of John Lewis, Sir Charlie Mayfield, stated in a private meeting earlier this year his intention to review the partnership’s “historic premium pay arrangements”, which he said were not in keeping with John Lewis’s competitors. We know what the John Lewis Partnership’s competitors are doing, so clearly the “review” of “legacy payments” is just a euphemism for the cutting of pay for long-standing staff. We have already seen clear evidence of that in Waitrose’s decision earlier this year to take away paid breaks from new and existing staff. The House will appreciate my frustration when Sir Charlie emailed me to say that he no longer had any intention of meeting me today. Buster, the boxer from John Lewis’s heart-warming Christmas ad, and I are very sad not to have the opportunity to discuss John Lewis’s plans for pay cuts. Can we assume that the decision not to meet me is an admission of guilt on its part? I guess that Buster and I will not know for sure until those pay cuts are announced in the coming year.

If I am wrong about John Lewis, I will happily return to this House and publicly apologise. I will be delighted to be wrong about John Lewis—it is a great British business that got great through great customer service from well-treated staff, the sort of people whom the Prime Minister describes as those giving their best and putting in the effort. I am happy to apologise if I am wrong and I reiterate to Sir Charlie that I would be happy to meet him and discuss this important issue wherever and whenever he likes.

Having concentrated on unscrupulous employment practices, I know that corporate executives are watching every move in Parliament so, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to deliver a message to all those company CEOs and chairmen of boards. The campaign to ensure that no one in this country loses money as a result of the national living wage will continue into the new year, until every worker gets the pay that they so richly deserve. My colleagues and I will be writing to chairmen this week to ask for their contract changes to be reversed at the January board meetings.

I want to use these last few minutes to express my deep concern for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Pakistan and in this country.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): As vice-chair of the all-party group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, I want to say that we all stand in solidarity with them wherever they are in the world. Does the hon. Lady agree that we should always speak out against religious persecution, wherever it occurs and whoever it falls on?

Siobhain McDonagh: I agree with the hon. Lady: whatever the religion and wherever people are, we must stand up for religious tolerance.

There have been two worrying developments overseas. The first was a raid in Rabwah, where 16 fully armed policemen and 12 plain-clothed officers from three police vehicles forced entry into an Ahmadi office without a warrant, wounding and arresting four innocent Ahmadi men. The raid was unlawful and most likely ordered by the highest ranking officials in the Punjab province.

The second was the destruction of the historic Chakwal mosque, which was attacked by more than 1,000 people a week ago. Stones were pelted and the property was burnt to “bring it under the influence of Islam.”

I need not remind hon. Members that Ahmadis are not allowed to define themselves as Muslim in Pakistan. I hope that all hon. Members will stand together to express their solidarity with the Ahmadi Muslim community and I ask the Foreign Secretary to do all he can to stand with the oppressed and persecuted Ahmadi people.

Finally, I wish all my constituents in Mitcham and Morden, all hon. Members and you, Mr Deputy Speaker, a very merry Christmas and a peaceful new year.

4.8 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): This is the season of good will—let us see whether we can change that, shall we?

What I am going to relate to Members is important to anybody in this House and anywhere else. It is about one part of rural Somerset—as most Members know, my constituency is there—where there is a determined effort to hijack public opinion and, I would say, horribly to kill off local democracy. It is a tale of gerrymandering, sharp practice and strong suspicions of corruption. It concerns the plan to merge West Somerset council with one of its neighbours, Taunton Deane, and I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) is not here. It is a merger most foul, and, as in most blood-curdling stories, the real motive is money.

Having won the House’s attention, I shall give Members the background to this sorry saga. West Somerset District Council is the smallest authority in England with a population of 35,000. It is a very beautiful part of the world and includes most of Exmoor. Unfortunately, the local council is perilously close to going bankrupt, partly because there are not enough people to pay the bills. For years the council has struggled to make ends meet and unfortunately it has failed. Three years ago it was lured—rather like a prostitute into a strange house—into a deal with Taunton Deane. For reasons that I do not completely understand, the leadership would not consider taking help from any other neighbour, including its nearest neighbour, Sedgemoor, which happens to be on of the best run councils in the United Kingdom. It has healthy finances and would have helped sort out West Somerset’s problems without neutering that council. But the old guard preferred to do a deal with Taunton. I do not know why.
Taunton Deane was—and still is—desperately short of money. Why on earth would it want to bail out a bankrupt neighbour when it is heading towards bankruptcy itself? Two failing councils together make a successful council? You do the maths. I believe that Taunton wants to get its greedy hands on the business rates that will ultimately come from Hinkley C nuclear power station.

[Interruption.] I heard somebody say “Ah!” from a sedentary position. The House is getting the plot. My little council may be on the verge of bankruptcy today, but in 20 years when Hinkley comes on line and produces electricity, it will become seriously rich. There is nothing like the prospect of gold, as Judas would say, to bring out the green streak in neighbouring town halls.

Taunton has always craved a share of the action. It is consumed with envy. When the plans for developing Hinkley were submitted, Taunton Deane put in a formal objection. A bit of an irony, I know. It did so out of jealousy and on the orders of its leader. He is a builder by trade and a sharp and interesting operator. John Williams is his name. He looks a little like Santa Claus, but please do not be fooled in this time of good will. He is more like Rudolph who has been garrotted, but I cannot see him saying, “Ho, ho, ho.” He rules Taunton Deane with a grip of iron and he likes to get his own way, mainly by foul means, so when West Somerset came begging, he spotted his chance and went for it.

Williams’s henchmen moved in like the mafia—horses’ heads in the bed—took over the local council, pensioned off most of the staff and started running everything from Taunton, not Minehead. Since then West Somerset’s 28 councillors have unfortunately—I say this against myself, as much as anybody—become little more than a glorified talking shop. I am not being rude, but the good people of West Somerset now realise that the levers of power are being manipulated elsewhere. There are those who think Scotland has a problem!

All that would matter less if Taunton Deane were a well-oiled machine, but the truth is quite the opposite. It is led by an autocrat and managed by an absentee. Its chief executive has been off for six months—with a bad back, we think, but we are not entirely sure. She has cost £80,000 in sick pay, and nobody knows what is wrong. The House will be relieved to learn, however, that she is coming back soon after seven months. She is to be phased in January. What is “phased in”? I should try that with my Whip, who is sitting in her place.

The penny has finally dropped! Penny James and Councillor Williams have a long and undistinguished record for getting everything wrong. They were enthusiastic supporters of Southwest One. I will not bore the House. It is an appalling IT project that cost the taxpayers of Somerset £80 million and saved nothing. Taunton urgently needs to replace its IT equipment, but it does not have anybody who knows what to do with a computer, so for the chance of another expensive disaster, watch this space and my place in the House.

Taunton Deane is known as cock-up valley. That is written all over it. One of the latest occurred a couple of weeks ago. I must tell the House about it; it is fascinating.

Bob Stewart: Oh, go on.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank my hon. Friend for his support.

The planning committee of West Somerset council was meant to be considering a highly controversial building application, but the planning officers in Taunton forgot—Fidel Castro-style—to inform any of the interested parties. Result: red faces, great anger, expense and—guess what—it had to be pulled. In my opinion West Somerset is trapped in an unfair partnership with an ineffective, overstretched and financially dodgy council. The chances are that there would be only nine or 10 councillors left when the changes come because of the demographics. It would spell the end of local democracy, not something that we want to see.

The plan was sneaked in under the radar, using a new Act of Parliament to get round the involvement of the Boundary Commission. Cunning stuff, as Baldrick would say. The Boundary Commission is an independent body, as the House knows. It always demands a fair referendum to test public opinion when it wants it. It would have gone through the emperor’s maths with a fine-toothed comb and made a fuss if the sums did not add up. However, Emperor Williams decided to push through his plans without bothering to tell Taunton Deane’s councillors precisely how he was going to do it.

In July, Taunton Deane Council approved the merger. That decision has now led to a legal challenge by a number of Taunton Deane’s councillors who insist that they were not told the truth. The legal challenge is powerful and, I can assure the House, is already causing the emperor and his team considerable anxiety. I am not surprised, because this time he has gone too far.

Do not get me wrong: I am not against change and I never have been. Partnerships can work and collaboration between councils is sensible, and maybe there are too many overpaid senior officers and too many people in town halls who do not know what they are doing. But big issues such as these deserve proper and thorough consultation. Instead we are getting a cheapskate confidence trick dreamt up by a cheapskate confidence trickster—try saying that quickly.

Through my door at the weekend came a questionnaire seeking my opinion, which will then be conveyed to the Government. Oh yeah? Golly! The plan is that money is so tight that something had to be done, so at a stroke, and without consultation, they ruled out the possibility of any partnerships. They are now looking to see how these councillors will work. Basically, there will now be a high-level business transformation document, which presumably is deliberately phrased to convince everyone that the only way is a full-blown merger.

With mergers come costly dreams, such as Southwest One, the multi million pound IT scheme. You name it, they’ve got it. This time Taunton Deane wants to put services online and trim back the staff, but that will not work because in West Somerset broadband is intermittent—in my house it is under a megabit—or non-existent, so the population do not have computers because they do not work. Pigeons are quicker. My constituents need to be able to talk to real human beings, not robots in Japan.

Unfortunately, the architects of these great schemes never do their homework. The business plan was riddled with financial guesswork, half-truths and downright lies. The document never offered the most sensible solution, which was to go back to the drawing board, talk to neighbouring councils—exactly what the Government told them to do—and find a more imaginative way

[Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger]
forward. That is what I want and what the Government want, but Emperor Williams does not much fancy working with top-flight councils, because he could not cope with it—he is not that bright—so he has done everything in his power to prevent constructive talks taking place. Now he wants a Greater Taunton, a sprawling new authority with no separate identity for West Somerset.

The questionnaire asked me just about everything, from my favourite colour to my inside leg measurement, but at no point have I been invited to provide my name and address, even though it is a consultation in two councils, so anybody could respond. In fact, please write in—you can all take part and it is great fun—but do not opt for the merger in West Somerset and Taunton Deane.

The whole of this is ridiculous. These forms could be filled in by Mickey Mouse or even Emperor Williams. They have set up a new website with similar questions. It is not doing the trick. People are not conned, and we should know that in this House—we have seen Brexit and Trump. But it might not stop Councillor Williams and his mates trying to skew the results by making multiple entries from different computers on his own—yup, it happened before. It is a consultation sham designed to be abused, and it was ordered and approved by a council that claims to be democratic.

No wonder the electors in the Taunton Deane ward of Blackdown last week voted out the Conservative candidate after 42 years—it has always been blue, but no longer. They actually went and got a Liberal Democrat; that is how bad the council is. People in Taunton Deane are sick of the way the council is working, and it is getting worse. It used to be the county town, but its famous market has moved to the far better Bridgwater, the old site is still derelict and ugly, the whole area is overrun with unpopular housing schemes and there seems to be a determination to build for the sake of building.

But guess what? Emperor Williams is a builder. He looks great in a yellow hard hat and reinforced boots, and he is often photographed alongside prominent local developers—I will leave that hanging. They looked like a happy family in their ceremonial Day-Glo regalia. This month, “Brother John” was seen with the bosses of Summerfields, a local housing association, which recently completed Taunton Deane’s brand new Direct Labour headquarters—it sounds almost like something from the other side of the Chamber. It is located on a business park owned by Summerfields—funny, that—but most of the council’s workload is actually in Taunton, another town, so the staff have to go from one place to another to do their work. It is absolute madness. So why was there no reference to the extra cost when these plans were considered? One does not know. Ask Brother John.

A year or so ago, Summerfield applied for permission to build affordable homes just beside the M5—the famous M5. Guess what? Taunton Deane let it slip through. I am told the construction work was subcontracted to a company owned by, guess who, Brother John himself. Such a relationship is a bit too close for comfort, but, guess what, nobody has ever said there is a conflict of interest—they would not get away with it in most places. There is absolutely nothing in Taunton Deane’s constitution that obliges councillors to declare an interest when a subcontract is awarded. That is not good. We need openness in local government—I do not need to tell anybody here that.

I have highlighted these things simply to give the House a sense of perspective about what is going on in my part of Somerset. My constituents will not have the wool pulled over their eyes. They can smell a rat, and they know what one looks like, and I am sure they will reject this half-baked merger scheme. They want to keep their council—and so they should.

4.20 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Should fate ever somehow decree that I end up as a member of a council in Somerset, I shall make it my absolute priority—horses’ heads or no—to stay on the right side of the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger).

This has been a tumultuous year culturally and politically. With the assassination of an ambassador and a further apparent terrorist atrocity yesterday, it seems we are finishing on a stark but familiar low. The attack in Germany drives home to me the fact that, to coin the phrase of the moment, we have more in common with our European partners than divides us. I fear that the current stand-off over Brexit and the forthcoming negotiations will drive us further apart from our neighbours, when these are surely times when those nations committed to the cause of democracy, freedom and pluralism must stick together and find common ground, rather than hunker down in an introspective bunker, focused on the challenges of Brexit while the big global challenges and threats remain.

The main debate in the EU negotiations seems to be one of immigration versus free movement and access to the single market. I am in favour of the free movement of labour; I am just not in favour of the free movement of unemployment and the free movement of exploitation. Over a decade ago, as a trade union official, I saw construction workers being brought in from abroad and used on big construction projects, names such as Staythorpe power station or Lindsey oil refinery spring to mind. Those immigrant workers would be used by the prime and principal subcontractors to drive down wages in a sector where skilled, well-paid jobs provided a good standard of living and were negotiated nationally between the unions and employers, and where the system worked. All of a sudden, wage rates were falling in a race to the bottom, which even good employers—the majority of employers—were forced to join to stay competitive. The difference was kept by the corporations and their bosses in the form of bigger profits, rather than being shared out among the men and women doing the work. Bogus agencies were set up in eastern Europe, advertising British jobs at below UK agreed rates of pay—again so that the money could be siphoned off from the workers and those at the top could keep a bigger slice for themselves.

It is unsurprising that so many working-class people voted to leave the EU, when that was their most visible personal experience of it, albeit it was not necessarily the EU that was at fault but the system of globalised capitalism we are seeing today. My solution would be simple: retain free movement in a qualified manner. If someone has a job, they can come and work here, but the job must be advertised in the UK and in English, and it must pay accepted UK rates. I suspect that the rest of the EU may soon find itself moving towards such a system anyway.
The Euro-referendum and, it would seem, events elsewhere, have brought into focus another new aspect of the state of politics, exemplified by the word of the year: post-truth. In the UK, there was no better example of that than the red Vote Leave bus, with its siren promise of an extra £350 million a week for the NHS—a promise it took Nigel Farage barely 12 hours to admit was false, on breakfast TV.

Members of the House who associated themselves with that promise have never apologised or faced the appropriate obloquy for their association with it. I have to say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I sought guidance from Mr Speaker and the Clerks as to how I might criticise Members such as the Foreign Secretary for their association with the bus and the claim. I learned that the rules of the House preclude me from calling Members such as the Foreign Secretary deliberately mendacious. Were I allowed to do so, I would, indeed, suggest that these Members were deliberately and wilfully mendacious in the pursuit of short-term political gain—a practice that is known in Cheshire as being a snollygoster. Of course, the rules do preclude me from that, so I will not be making any such allegation.

Post-truth politics is dangerous because it devalues our political system, corrodes the quality of our democracy and diminishes public trust in our institutions. It has a broader effect too—a cultural effect, because as well as undermining honesty and trust and celebrating deceit, it celebrates ignorance and stupidity in saying that learning is not to be valued and has nothing to contribute. So when the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) told Faisal Islam on “Sky News” that he had “had enough of experts”, it was a breathtaking attack on progress, an attack on scientific and cultural learning, a devaluation of the intrinsic importance of the—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. You are mentioning Members. Did you give notice that you were going to mention Members in the Chamber?

Christian Matheson: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will bear that in mind and amend my comments suitably as a result.

When Members say that they have had enough of experts, that is an attack on progress—a devaluation of the intrinsic importance of the accumulation of knowledge as a good thing that has benefited, and will continue to benefit, humanity across the ages.

I say this clearly to the House: please reject the dishonesty of post-truth politics but reject also its regressive and reactionary message that ignorance and dishonesty are somehow a good thing. Post-truth did not put a man on the moon or develop the Hubble space telescope, post-truth did not invent the internet or the worldwide web, and post-truth will not find a cure for cancer. If we, in this place cannot address an argument with fact, it may be time to reassess whether our views are correct and sustainable.

As we look forward to the new year, I make a further plea to the House to reject the notion that the 52% vote to leave is somehow the will of the people. It is the will of the majority of the people and it must be respected—we must deliver the exit from the EU agreed in the referendum—but it cannot be portrayed as the will of all the people. The views of the 48% must be taken into account in how we exit the EU; they cannot be ignored or airbrushed away. I fully support and pay tribute to hon. Members on my Front Bench who are trying to bring the country together and make efforts to represent the 100%, because I fear that, in addition to the perils of post-truth politics, we face another threat—one of cataclysmic disunity. The referendum was brought about by this Government to halt long-running rifts over Europe in certain parts of the House, but those rifts have now been transferred to the whole country, and have fed narrow nationalism in certain parts of it. Narrow, petty nationalism cannot be the solution to any problem that we face in the world today.

I am certainly not imagining a nation where we all agree and everything is fine and dandy, but a basic consensus about how we do politics has been attacked, as exemplified by recent media attacks on High Court judges and their integrity. We are stronger when we stick together. I have never known our country to be so deeply and unpleasantly divided. We have heard so much about putting the “great” back into Great Britain; perhaps now, with all the external threats and challenges we face, it is time to put the “united” back into the United Kingdom.

4.27 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I wish to address two very important constituency issues: transport infrastructure improvements, and education provision in Filton and Bradley Stoke.

The Metrobus scheme will provide a dedicated bus route from the south of Bristol to the northern fringe of Bristol, including my constituency, in order to provide an alternative to private car journeys. It should carry 600,000 passengers per year; which equates to roughly 820 two-person car journeys a day. It is a key element in encouraging economic growth and unlocking future housing potential. It is a £100 million project funded by the Department for Transport, South Gloucestershire Council and Bristol City Council. I have always been a keen supporter of the scheme and remain so.

However, the Metrobus works have caused major congestion, disruption and delays for the residents of Bradley Stoke and the surrounding areas. For example, one of my constituency team usually has a 10 to 15-minute drive home during the rush hour, but one evening she had a journey that took nearly two hours, most of which was stuck in stationary traffic. As a resident of Almondsbury, with my constituency office in Bradley Stoke, I have experienced and shared the frustration of people stuck in these jams during commuting hours without much evidence at times, it seems, of work actually taking place on the Metrobus route. Constituents have reported to me that, while stuck in their cars in traffic jams, they have seen workmen asleep on the site. The works have taken too long and are over time, and initially there was no understanding or appreciation that people have to get in and out of Bradley Stoke every day to travel to school and work. The project has suffered from a lack of communication by the contractors and the council with locals.

I organised and chaired a public meeting earlier this year to get local people face to face with the contractors, the council and First Bus representatives. A few weeks
ago, I organised a meeting with the Alun Griffiths road contractors, MetroBus, South Gloucestershire Council, including the lead councillor responsible for transport in South Gloucestershire, Councillor Colin Hunt, and local Bradley Stoke town councillors, to try to find a workable solution to the congestion. I also met the Secretary of State for Transport a week or so ago to bring the issue to his attention and ask for his help.

Of course, I understand that major transport infrastructure projects and improvement works will cause disruption and jams occasionally. However, right next door to the congestion is the M4-M5 managed motorway scheme, which was constructed by Balfour Beatty on time and on budget. Often the contractors worked through the night and at all hours. One evening they removed a pedestrian bridge and replaced it that same night. The works were completed with minimum disruption to local residents.

I suggested to the Alun Griffiths contractors that those ought to be the methods that they should aspire to adopt, but I was told that they could not work longer hours due to health and safety considerations. Future transport infrastructure improvements should be done along the lines of the managed motorway scheme, with minimal disruption to local road users, rather than along the lines of the initially shambolic MetroBus works in my constituency.

Since the recent meeting that I organised with the stakeholders, greater efforts have been made to communicate with local residents, and progress has been made in assisting the flow of traffic to minimise the impact on local road users at peak times. However, the MetroBus works need to be completed as quickly as possible, so that we can start reaping the benefits of the scheme.

The other local issue that I want to raise relates to Winterbourne International Academy in my constituency. The Ridings Federation of Academies, which runs that academy and Yate International Academy in the constituency of Thornbury and Yate, was issued with a financial notice to improve and provide a plan on how it would achieve a balanced budget, as it has a potential deficit of £1 million. Winterbourne International Academy has had some issues with its leadership and management over the past year or two, and it now finds itself in a position where it needs to be re-brokered into a new academy structure.

During that process, parents, teachers and pupils felt that they were not being kept informed. I and my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall), were contacted by a large number of constituents who were very concerned about what was happening at the school. My hon. Friend and I met my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education to bring the matter to her attention. We also met Rebecca Clark, the regional schools commissioner for south-west England, and I met the chair of trustees, Claire Emery. That enabled us to get more background information about the situation in which the federation finds itself, and to respond to our constituents and reassure them that everything possible was being done to find a solution to the difficulties in which the schools find themselves.

Winterbourne International Academy will now be taken over by a new trust. The trustees of the Ridings Federation of Academies have considered their options and communicated their recommendations to the regional schools commissioner, who has taken them to Lord Nash, the Minister, for the final decision. There should be full clarity about who will run the trust early in the new year, but I want to place it on the record that, in future, better communication with parents, pupils and staff is needed.

I understand that the outcome that parents, pupils and staff are hoping for is that the school becomes part of a multi-academy trust managed jointly by the existing Olympus Academy Trust, which runs the successful Bradley Stoke Community School, and the Castle School Education Trust, which runs the successful Castle School in Thornbury. I welcome the recent news that, with effect from 3 January 2017, Dave Baker, chief executive officer of Olympus Academy Trust, and Will Roberts, CEO of Castle School Education Trust, will jointly provide interim leadership support for Winterbourne International Academy, with a view to appointing a principal at the end of January.

The third issue that I want to address ties in with my membership of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and the Defence Committee. After the Good Friday agreement, hundreds of convicted terrorists were let out of prison in the name of peace and reconciliation. There are, therefore, lots of former terrorists walking the streets, some of whom have worked their way up into eminent positions in political life. We had the debacle over the on-the-runs letters and the John Downey case, where there is essentially a de facto amnesty for former terrorists, and yet the full force of the law is being used to prosecute people who were on the other side of events: former soldiers who were just doing their best, doing their duty and serving our great country. This is clearly wrong, and it smacks of victors’ justice. It cannot be right to let terrorists out of prison and give them get-out-of-jail letters at the same time as we pursue former British soldiers. Surely, if there is to be lasting peace and reconciliation, there needs to be fairness on all sides—not that I think for one minute that there is any moral equivalence between terrorists, and soldiers and security forces trying to keep the peace and protect lives.

My younger son, Michael, passed out of his basic military training in Pirbright a couple of weeks ago. Of course, I am immensely proud of him. When he is, as I hope he will be, deployed on an operational tour and he asks me for advice—not that sons are very good at asking their fathers for advice, but I have done an operational tour myself—do I say to him, ‘Be careful,’ because if mistakes are made, if things go wrong or if the politics change, even 45 years later, he could be pursued through the courts in his retirement in nothing less than a politically motivated witch hunt? I do not think so. My advice would be the same as the advice I received before my operational tour: ‘If you feel as though your life is in danger or your comrades’ lives are in danger, do not hesitate to defend yourself.’ Our Government need to support former servicepeople against this injustice, because what is happening is a stain on our country’s honour. We are letting down so badly the people who risked their life to keep us safe, protect our freedoms and preserve our way of life.

4.36 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am honoured to follow the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti). I agreed with much of what he said.
I am going to speak about three issues that have come up in community casework in my constituency. I have previously raised the issue of how hysteroscopies and uterine biopsies are conducted in the NHS. I have drawn to the attention of the House the serious pain and distress suffered by far too many women, who are not well served by the advice and support—or, frankly, the lack of support and empathy—that they receive from clinicians and the NHS.

As the House will, I know, be aware, in the hysteroscopy procedure a small camera is passed through the cervix to examine, and often take a sample from, the lining of the womb. Yes, that means cutting out a piece of the lining of the womb. The procedure is useful in the diagnosis of cancer and other womb conditions, as well as to investigate fertility issues and to perform minor operations. For most women, it is a significantly uncomfortable procedure, but for a sizeable number it can be unbearably painful, leading to significant blood loss, loss of consciousness and, in some cases, hospitalisation. Such procedures are usually carried out as outpatient appointments, and often without any kind of anaesthesia.

The NHS website helpfully says of the procedure: “You may experience some discomfort similar to period cramps while it’s carried out, but it shouldn’t be painful.” To say that that advice is misleading is something of an understatement. The problem is that for some women, the procedure is unacceptably painful. Hysteroscopy Action estimates that up to a quarter of UK hysterectomy patients have reported severe pain. I know that you will agree with me, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it is not acceptable to be led to presume that the worst that can happen is that, as the NHS website says, women will experience some discomfort, given that the reality is very different. All women need to be offered proper anaesthesia at the appropriate moment so that the sizeable minority who experience significant pain can be supported. To do anything else is nothing short of barbaric.

This is the third time that I have raised this matter in an Adjournment debate, so I have decided not to read out the cases that individuals have mailed to me, trusting that their stories will get action. Today, I ask the Deputy Leader of the House whether he will raise the matter on my behalf with the Department of Health and get a statement from the Department about pain management with hysteroscopy.

We need better systems to be put in place to ensure appropriate triage, rather than trial and error. More information about what may happen needs to be made available to patients beforehand, accompanied by the support required to ensure that women understand the risks and can make real choices about the best method of treatment for them. It is not acceptable for women to be told by a male doctor that they must have a low pain threshold when they are begging for the procedure to be stopped.

Given that this is the third time I have raised the issue and that I have received warm and comforting words from Health Ministers in the past, I fail to understand what is preventing such action. Frankly, I wonder whether it is because of money—the cost of an anaesthetic being available to women. I look forward to receiving a written response from the Department of Health. I am not an unreasonable woman, in the main—
Ali Asghar Khan, the husband of a constituent. He was killed in Pakistan on a trip to visit family. He had been celebrating Eid and was returning home with two friends when their vehicle was ambushed on a mountainous road. A gunman opened fire and both Mr Khan and the driver of the vehicle were killed instantly. The third passenger, who was sat in the back of the car, managed to escape by jumping into the ravine and was subsequently able to raise the alarm.

My understanding is that Mr Khan was not the intended target of the attack, but that is of course little consolation to his widow and family. My constituents have struggled to ensure that his death is fully investigated and the perpetrators brought to account. Sadly, they are struggling to the point of being asked for money by the local investigating police force to transport files and take witness statements.

I have written to the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), about the case, and his response was really quite helpful. My purpose in raising the case today is to draw attention to the plight of the family of my late constituent and get a greater understanding of how the Government can meet the safety concerns of British nationals in Pakistan and what assistance is afforded to them while visiting the country. When he winds up, perhaps the Deputy Leader of the House will say whether he will consider pushing for some parliamentary time to discuss the subject more widely.

I thank the House for the opportunity to raise these issues today. I wish you, Mr Deputy Speaker, all colleagues and all the amazing staff of this House, who are so very good with us every single day, the very best for Christmas and the new year.

4.46 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Having served in Northern Ireland during the troubles there, I have been asked by my old comrades in the Cheshire Regiment to highlight an iniquity that has already been referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), my good friend: that many British soldiers could be reinvestigated for their actions during fatal shooting incidents. Apparently, the Police Service of Northern Ireland has been instructed to look at about 230 fatal shooting incidents, during which some 302 people died, almost all of them terrorists. If that is the case, my understanding is that about 1,000 ex-soldiers could be hauled in to account for their actions all those years ago, and could even be retrospectively charged with manslaughter or murder.

I am appalled that such actions are being taken against our soldiers when so many terrorists from all sides were granted full pardons under the Good Friday agreement. To me, it looks like a highly political and vindictive move by Mr Barra McGrory, the Director of Public Prosecutions in Northern Ireland. As I understand it, in the past McGrory represented Provisional Sinn Féin and on-the-run terror suspects as their solicitor. He negotiated an effective amnesty for many of them. His background hardly suggests impartiality to me.

Our soldiers were trained to apply strict rules of engagement. The so-called yellow card—technically, “Instructions by the Director of Operations for Opening Fire in Northern Ireland”—was both detailed and precise.

The rules of engagement outlined exactly when soldiers could use firearms, and our troops spent a long time being instructed about them during pre-Northern Ireland training sessions.

Opening fire in Northern Ireland was considered a very serious matter by the Army. After every shooting incident, regardless of casualties, the Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary held an investigation. When such events involved casualties or fatalities, strict procedures were followed. That normally involved soldiers having to go to court to prove that they had acted within the law and the yellow card rules.

In one incident in which I played a small part, I recall having to tell two soldiers that, having escaped with their lives by opening fire, they would none the less be charged with manslaughter. Unsurprisingly, the two men, still in some shock, were utterly appalled. They shouted at me, saying that they had been abandoned by the Army. As their superior officer, I totally understood their feelings and shared them. None the less, the Royal Ulster Constabulary had informed me that the two soldiers had to be charged with manslaughter. Personally I was furious and I argued vociferously that this was wrong and very unfair. Regardless, the soldiers appeared in court. It was quickly proved that they had acted within the law, and their case was dismissed.

It was difficult for me and especially the soldiers at the time to understand the reason for that court appearance, but it was explained to me that, having had their case dismissed, they could never be charged again—perhaps, if the political climate changed. Guess what? It seems to have done. I had difficulty seeing the logic at the time. Then later, after the immediate drama was over, I did. I believed that the whole matter had been dealt with in court and it was over—for ever. But maybe I was wrong. I presume that my two men could be among the 302 soldiers apparently under investigation by the Director of Public Prosecutions in Northern Ireland.

I do not maintain that our servicemen and women are above the law—of course they are not. But re-opening all fatal shooting incidents involving soldiers is hugely one-sided and looks very bad to the armed services community, and that includes me and several other Members of the House.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful to the hon. and gallant Gentleman for giving way. He was a leader of the Cheshire Regiment, and many of my constituents served with him in that excellent regiment. Does he agree that all those former servicemen who risked their lives serving in Northern Ireland, including my constituents, deserve to have that black cloud removed from them as quickly as possible?

Bob Stewart: I thank my good friend—I call him that because he comes from Chester and I commanded the Cheshire Regiment—for that intervention. Yes, our soldiers should not be under this cloud. They are not terrorists. Terrorists have been given amnesty and a pardon in the Good Friday agreement. Why should our men, some of them quite old now, not sleep soundly when terrorists whom they have killed do so? It is wrong iniquitous and possibly malicious, and it is a huge waste of public money while we are at it. Why is the Director of Public Prosecutions not telling the Police Service of Northern
4.55 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** It is always a real pleasure to follow the gallant gentleman, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I wholeheartedly support his comments, and those of the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti); I think they resonate with everyone in the House. We all want the prosecutions and investigations to stop.

May I first associate myself and my party, the Democratic Unionist party, with the comments that have been made about all those who have lost loved ones in the awfulness of the unspeakable attack, so close to a church, in Berlin? We offer our sincere sympathies. It is good that we remember, at this time of year, those who grieve.

In the short time available, I want to speak about making a difference. I also want to focus on this time of the year. I am one of those guys who loves Christmas. I love taking my grandchildren to special church services, attending services in different churches and just remembering the real reason for the season: a chance to celebrate Jesus. We all know, in all reality, that 25 December is not just the day Jesus was born. It is a time to focus our minds on the greatest gift ever given to mankind: the Lord Jesus, the greatest story ever told.

Last week, I tabled an early-day motion on the real meaning of Christmas. Many Members took the opportunity to sign it and to endorse that comment. The Christmas message is the celebration of Jesus who came as a baby, grew to be a man and gave his life for those who would accept him into their hearts. I love the celebration of his birth, as I see it as a time for faith, for family and for focus. I want to thank the Lord Jesus for the personal faith that I have.

I thank God for the time that I spend over Christmas with my family: with my wife and the boys, my granddaughters and my mother. I take the two days as days to be with them. I cherish the time to laugh—and to be laughed at!—and just to be in each other's company. Off in the distance, the old man noticed a small boy approaching, wearing his wellington boots and carrying a bucket. As the boy walked, he paused every so often. As he grew closer, the man could see that he was occasionally bending down to pick up an object, put it into his bucket and take it out to the sea. The boy came closer still and the man called out, “Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?” The young boy paused, looked up and replied, “Taking starfish into the ocean. The tide has washed them up on to the beach and they can’t return to the sea by themselves. When the sun gets high, they will die unless I take them back to the water.” The old man said, “But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on the beach, and I am afraid that you will not be able to make much of a difference.” The young boy bent down and picked up yet another starfish, put it into his bucket and took it out to the sea as far as he could. Then he turned, smiled and said, “Ah, yes, but I can make a difference to this one.” People may raise their eyebrows—

**Christian Matheson:** I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his inspiring story. I would like to pay tribute to his work on the all-party group on freedom of religion or belief. It is my belief that he is making a difference to people across the world, and for that, I am most grateful to him.

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which I greatly appreciate.

People may raise their eyebrows when I highlight individual cases in this place, but it is because I believe in trying to make a difference where I can. There is time for each Member to focus on our constituencies to see where we can make a difference. It could be the time taken to fill out a benefits form for someone who is deserving; contacting the Housing Executive to get someone's heating fixed more quickly; the time spent sitting down with businessmen and women to see how they feel the Government could do better for small and medium-sized businesses; giving someone help to get an operation or to get further up the list for their medical examinations and investigations; contacting the road...
service about potholes; the time taken with producers to register concerns about Brexit and to highlight the necessities going forward; or the time we take as MPs to encourage others to focus on their families and communities.

I believe that we have a duty and a responsibility to attempt to encourage others to do what we do and not simply as we say.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland in my area recently put a post on Facebook, and instead of breaking into a house where an elderly lady had rung for an ambulance but could not come to the door, neighbours were able to contact the family to let the emergency services in. This sense of community simply warmed my heart, and harks back to the days long ago when people left their doors open and their neighbours looked out for them. I am sure we can all remember that happening in the past. There is more of a need now than ever to take care of each other where we can, to look out for our elderly relatives and neighbours, and to help where we can. Yes, it takes time; yes, it takes effort; but we will all be the beneficiaries from living in a community that cares, one in which people can and do trust their neighbours. Perhaps that is the Christmas message that applies all year round, which should be sent from this Chamber: make a difference where you can.

I am very aware that I am only one of 650 Members in this place. I am only one of an eight-strong DUP team grouping in this place. It is a party that, if I may say so respectfully, boxes above its weight. Instead of throwing my hands up and giving up on making a difference, I pledge to keep on making a difference where I can. This is the mantra that I believe this new year should bring: do what we can for everyone. I have a lovely quotation from Edward Everett Hale:

“[I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do.]

This is a lesson that we in this place can all take on board: to have the mentality of doing what we can for all those that we can help.

I want to put on record my thanks to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to all the Deputy Speakers and to Mr Speaker for your understanding and your patience, and for giving us the chance to speak in this House. That applies particularly to myself, given that I try to contribute on a regular basis. I thank you, too, for understanding my Ulster Scots accent. I see that the Deputy Leader of the House is looking at me, and I know that he enjoys my Ulster Scots accent, so I hope he has understood my words clearly. I clearly write down all the words. Just when I think they are going to make a difference, I send down a wee note asking, “What was that you said again?” We still have some learning to do, but it is a privilege and pleasure to be a Member of this House.

Bob Stewart: I would like to say one thing to my friend: sometimes we may not understand you, but my God, you’ve got one hell of a heart, and we can see it.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As he knows, I think the same about him, and we have a mutual understanding in relation both to our service in Northern Ireland, in uniform, and to our service in the House.

I wish all right hon. and hon. Members a very merry Christmas and a happy new year, and God bless for 2017.

5.4 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I, too, think that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) makes a big difference in the House, and is a great asset to the Chamber.

I agreed with everything that was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers) about the onerous nature of the quarterly tax returns, and I hope that the Minister will think about her proposals, which I fully support.

I want to speak briefly about assessments by the Department for Work and Pensions. I am pleased to say that we have good employment figures in my constituency, and I am grateful for the fact that since 2010 the unemployment figures have decreased by 34%. I am, however, concerned about the attitude shown in DWP assessments.

Many of us have seen Ken Loach’s film “I, Daniel Blake”, and observed the excellent acting of Dave Johns in that film. It is a very moving film, but what is more troubling for me is the people whom I have met in my surgery who are not actors, but who have lived through the kind of scenes that have been portrayed by Ken Loach. Indeed, I have seen people who have been treated worse than the character in “I, Daniel Blake”.

My concern, which I have mentioned to Ministers in the past, is that people with terminal illnesses or degenerative conditions must not go through an assessment if they have a consultant’s report. I value the assurance from the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), that such people did not need to have repeated assessments, but others who undergo the DWP assessment must be treated with dignity. I have met people—gentlemen older than me—who have been shamed in those assessments, and who have not been given the respect that they deserve. That is shameful.

I believe that, just as we need the police to wear body cameras, we need DWP assessments to be recorded—with, obviously, the agreement of the people undergoing them—so that if it is felt that someone has not been treated with respect, or, worse, has been shamed, the assessors can at least be shown why and how they have given that impression, and training can be provided so that it never, ever happens again. There needs to be recording, and there needs to be more accountability. No one should ever feel shamed when undergoing these assessments.

Having said that, as this is Christmas, I wish Mr Speaker and his Deputies, our excellent staff and all Members a very merry and peaceful break.

5.8 pm

Sir David Amess: Before the House adjourns for the Christmas recess, I want to raise a number of points. As we move towards Christmas we celebrate the birth of new life, but many Members and others who work here will be reflecting on bereavements. I have been in the Chamber and listened to outpourings from colleagues who have lost babies. Then we think of the murder of
[Sir David Amess]

our colleague Jo Cox. I join other Members in hoping that that record will become No. 1, and a good bit of money will be made from it.

My own mother, Maud, died earlier this year at the age of 104. People would say that she had had a good innings, and she did live long enough to vote in the European referendum. Obviously, however, for many people Christmas will not be quite the same, so I want to spend a moment talking about bereavement counselling services. As I listened to colleagues talking about their experiences 10, 15 or even 20 years ago, it was clear to me that those services are very important.

I praise the all-party parliamentary group for funerals and bereavement for what it does, and, in particular, I praise Fair Havens Hospice in my constituency. For over 30 years the hospice’s staff have carried out the wishes of Dame Cicely Saunders and have allowed people to live rather than to die. They play a vital role in supporting families in their time of greatest need and their bereavement counselling services are second to none. More than 75% of those who work at the hospice are volunteers, and £3 out of every £4 goes to the hospice. I hope that somewhere in the wider world there is an individual with lots of money who might help us, as we want to kick-start the fund for our new hospice.

Southend hospital has a number of challenges. I was convinced by the Essex success regime that we would see management changes, but that just has not happened yet. I hope we can get on with it, and any alterations to accident and emergency services can only happen if they are clinically led.

I am delighted to tell the House that on 1 January Southend alternative city of culture will be launched. An illuminated train will be going to the end of the pier—the longest pier in the world—and our new Southend alternative city of culture will be launched. I was greatly heartened by the way the local community is rallying around in support of the event.

At the same time Southend will be celebrating the 125th anniversary of the founding of the borough. There will be events celebrating the historic milestone, including the festival of Southend-on-Sea, led by her worship the Mayor of Southend, Mrs Judith McMahon, and the leader of the council, John Lamb. It will be a wonderful occasion.

John Lamb is very concerned that the upper-tier local authorities are struggling to meet the spiralling costs of adult social care, with budgets still reducing through reductions in Government grant. I will be grateful if my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House gently asks the Secretary of State to again look at funding for adult social care, particularly for councils such as Southend.

The Scottish National party chose the Chilcot inquiry as the subject of one of its Opposition day debates. I was very disappointed with the outcome. The Chilcot report took seven years to produce and cost £13 million. Many Members were not present so cannot be blamed, but a terrible mistake was made. It is clear from the report who was to blame and I very much hope that at some stage the former Prime Minister Tony Blair will be called before one of the Select Committees to give an account of how on earth he came to those decisions which were clearly wrong.

On Iran, I was very pleased to see that the refugees from Camp Liberty were successfully airlifted to Albania back in September, and I hope that Mrs Maryam Rajavi, leader of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, will be able to speak in the UK at some point.

School inspections is a worry for all our schools, and I was appalled by the inspection at our wonderful local Our Lady of Lourdes school. I do not know whether the inspector had an agenda, but how on earth the inspectorate team could have judged the school as failing beggars belief. That shows absolutely poor judgment. School inspections generally should be revisited when a new chief inspector of schools is in place.

My constituent David Forde was arrested under counter-terrorism legislation at the beginning of the month after returning from Kurdistan where he had been giving infantry and life-saving medical training to the Peshmerga, who have been funded by the UK. His arrest is a disgrace. This constituent has been left with no money and no support and I intend on another occasion to raise the subject in a dedicated Adjournment debate.

Mr Markos, a constituent of mine, and his mother have lost their home—he has lost everything—following a boundary dispute about a fence that was just 4 inches out of place. In his case, the law was an ass, and this perverse case really wants looking at again.

In August, we launched a public appeal in Southend for the London Shipwreck Trust. I am a trustee of the organisation, and it is wonderful that valuable artefacts are being rescued from the Thames estuary.

Pulse fishing has been brought to my attention by fishermen in Leigh-on-Sea. I do not think that fish terribly enjoy having pulses sent through their bodies, and I hope that the Fisheries Minister will carefully consider the issue before he comes to meet me and others.

The Eastwood Academy is one of the outstanding schools in my constituency. It has achieved magnificent progress at all levels and was selected to appear in the 2016 Parliamentary Review for its efforts in raising standards in secondary education.

I was delighted to support Gas Safety Week. There have been more than 20 gas-related deaths and over 1,000 gas-related injuries over the past three years.

I recently met Jesuits from the Philippines, including Richard Greenwood, assistant director of Jesuit Missions, and Father Pat and Bernie, who spoke to me about the inspiring work of SLB, their organisation which promotes socio-political involvement and has led massive disaster-relief operations. I commend them for their work.

Anglia Ruskin University celebrates 25 years of university status next year. I recently met the new vice-chancellor, who briefed me on the plans for the next 25 years, including specialist medical degrees aimed at increasing the number of doctors and nurses to fill vacancies in the NHS. I salute the university for its work.

Marine protection zones are important. The UK has a reputation for being a leader in ocean conservation, and I congratulate conservationists on their work.

I want to refer to a few local issues. I congratulate Borough, a third-generation family-owned plating business, for sustaining its operations for 50 years. I was delighted to visit Pride & Joy Classic Cars in my constituency.
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who represents arguably the second best seaside resort on the east coast. Before I move on to what are more mundane issues than those that others have spoken about, I want to say how much I agree with the comments of my honourable and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who spoke for the whole House.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—my hon. Friend—reminded us of the real message of Christmas. Like many Members, I have attended many services of nine lessons and carols over the past couple of weeks, which of course include the opening passages from the gospel of St John. I always find particularly profound the section about how Jesus came into the world, but “the world knew him not.”

We often reflect on some of the more perverted religious happenings in the news, but we should remember the true meaning and the fact that faith is the driving force for so much good that happens in the world. I commend the hon. Gentleman for what he said about that.

I wish to reflect on some of the more mundane issues that affect my constituency and highlight some challenges facing it. In doing so, I am mindful that I do not want to give the impression that I am just here holding out a begging bowl to the Government for more money for this, that and the other, although that would be very welcome. The resort of Cleethorpes has responded to the changing situation and has an offer unsurpassed among resorts on the east coast. Only last week, one of the three finalists in the British high street awards were the traders from Sea View Street in Cleethorpes, which shows how dedicated small, independent retailers can be. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West talked about the longest pier, but Cleethorpes has the pier of the year, a prize that we are certainly not going to be giving up easily to Southend, however cultured it may or may not be. My constituency also contains the largest port complex in the country, at Immingham, and has a rich rural hinterland stretching as far north as Barton-upon-Humber, at the southern end of the Humber bridge.

So much for the advantages of my area—I now turn to how we are going to meet the challenges. Regeneration is an essential ingredient of lifting morale, and in the North East Lincolnshire Council area we have put together a team made up of the council leader, the chief executive, myself and a number of private sector partners. We are putting together plans that I am sure will attract private sector investors, but that will need some Government support. I have discussed this with a number of Ministers in recent weeks, and we hope to receive that support when plans are finalised. As I said, this is not just holding out a begging bowl, but a genuine attempt to inject investment into the area.

Cleethorpes has done incredibly well, but may I draw attention to local government funding? I recognise that local government was bloated and, to some extent, inefficient. I spent 26 years as a local councillor, so I have seen many of its failings, but the Government need to recognise that a council budget can be cut only so far. I am not referring to adult social care, important though that is; many of the things that make our lives that little bit better—libraries, parks and gardens and so on—are being cut to the bone in many respects. Those little things do improve people’s quality of life, and I urge the Government to recognise that as we try to come to terms with balancing the country’s finances.

Housing is rightly a priority for the Government, who have introduced many new and innovative schemes, but too many homes are being built on greenfield sites. The main entrance to a town such as Cleethorpes could be greatly enhanced by investment, whereby retail units that have been made redundant by a change in shopping habits could be given new life. This is a main arterial route into the resort, and investment in such an area is very worthwhile. While on the subject of housing, let me say that I note the section in the statement by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government saying that a consultation would be held on whether or not to withhold new homes bonus payments from developments that were granted only after appeal. I can give my response to that consultation now: forget it! Local democracy is important and the Government have done a lot to bring about localism, but this move goes completely against that. I urge the Government to think again and abandon even the consultation.

Transport connections are vital to any local economy, and my constituency is no exception. It is moderately well served by road, with the A180-M180 link providing access into the national motorway network, although there is room for improvement. The A180 still has stretches of that old concrete surface, which is extremely annoying to my constituents who live in villages such as Stallingborough and causes an unacceptable level of noise.

I welcome the almost complete £100 million A160 upgrade, which will enhance access to the port of Immingham. The next part of the jigsaw in the network of roads that give access to Immingham and the Humber ports is the A15 between Lincoln and where it joins the A180 close to Scunthorpe. It is an extremely dangerous single-carriageway road that urgently needs dualling. I recognise that it is a local road and that the Government can therefore get away with saying, “It’s nothing to do with us, guv,” but it provides important access to the Humber ports, which are part of a strategic Government policy, so the Government need to give the road some consideration.
Let me turn to rail services. This is yet another opportunity for me to put the case for a direct rail service between Cleethorpes and Grimsby and London Kings Cross. Business in the area regards it as vital and this issue is raised at every meeting I and neighbouring MPs attend. As I mentioned, Immingham is the largest port in the country—25% of the rail freight in the country comes and goes from there, but passengers cannot and the area needs that. The Office of Rail and Road recently considered an application from Great North Eastern Railways, an open-access operator that wanted to provide those services. However, because it was linked to additional services into Yorkshire, the ORR had to reject it because it had to protect Virgin East Coast's market share. I recognise how important that is from the Treasury’s point of view, as Virgin pays a huge amount of money for the privilege of running those trains, but that is decision more to do with the interests of the company and the Treasury rather than the interests of the passengers?

I chair the regeneration committee for Barton-upon-Humber in the North Lincolnshire Council part of my constituency. I congratulate Councillor Rob Waltham, the deputy leader of the council, who sits alongside me at those meetings and delivers some of the minor improvements to the town that are essential. I know that that goes against what I was saying earlier, but I question how long even a well-run council such as North Lincolnshire will be able to maintain those schemes.

I remind the House that the rural economy is not just about agriculture but about other rural pursuits and it is important that we recognise that conservation comes naturally to those working in the countryside.

Finally, may I reflect on the educational performance in our area? Like many coastal communities we have many high-performing schools but poor standards overall. The argument about selection will run and run, as it has for the past 30 years. My view is that if selection can provide our young people with more choice in the schools in the area, we should focus on the areas where results demand change. Grammar schools can be a force for good and, for some, that is an opportunity we should not deny them. I would also argue that bilateral schools, which are part selective, have a role to play in my area.

I will conclude by following on from the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West about Brexit, which was voted for by 70% of my constituents. I believe that they were right to do so and that it will give our country more opportunities. In our area, the common fisheries policy has long been a cause of concern. I urge the Government, as I have done on many occasions, not to forget the fishing industry. It was forgotten in those original negotiations in the 1970s. At one time up to 600 deep-sea trawlers sailed out of Grimsby, providing thousands of jobs to the Grimsby and Cleethorpes area. That is now down to a handful of near-water boats, but there are still great opportunities for those in the fishing industry and the food and fish processing industry, which are vital to the Cleethorpes constituency.

I conclude by wishing you, Mr Speaker, and all Members and staff a happy Christmas and a peaceful new year.

[Martin Vickers]

5.30 pm

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I start by thanking all the emergency services for their work over the Christmas period, especially those who will be working while we are enjoying time with our families. As I propose to speak on a Home Affairs issue, I pay particular tribute to the police.

I was out on a Walk the Met session with the Chessington safer neighbourhood team just last week and saw the excellent work they do for us day in, day out. Kingston is now the safest borough in London and I want to put on record my thanks to Chief Superintendent Glenn Tunstall, who retires in three days as Kingston's borough commander with that accolade. I am pleased that I started my dealings with Chief Superintendent Tunstall with a campaign for more police officers in Kingston town centre and ended it with a campaign for automatic number plate recognition software on the A3 corridor, both of which I pushed for and our Conservative council is delivering.

Today I want to speak about a national challenge for the police—the rise of hate speech and extremism online. I will refer to Facebook and Twitter because they are the most widely used social networks, not because they are the only platforms on which these issues arise or the only companies that bear responsibility for them. Social media has revolutionised the way we communicate, the way we receive news and information and the way companies advertise. Undoubtedly, it has many social benefits and can be used as a force for good, but social media platforms are being abused by those who wish to do our society and individuals in our society grave harm.

It is important to remember at all times that these social media platforms are not established and maintained out of a sense of altruism. They are designed to make money for their owners, principally through advertising revenues. The revenues of Facebook in particular are enormous and I do not criticise the company for that.

Right now, in less than a minute, any Member of this House with an iPhone would be able to find copious amounts of hate speech on Twitter—racism, especially anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, homophobia and many other forms of discrimination, and not just language that would not survive the Equality Act 2010, but language that is downright abusive and would not survive our criminal law.

In the Home Affairs Committee’s recent report on anti-Semitism, we outlined how a Jewish colleague received 2,500 abusive tweets over a few days using the hashtag #filthyjewbitch. Two of her abusers have already been sent to prison for this. Now there can be no dispute that that hashtag is offensive, abusive and racist, yet if one searches for that hashtag now, as I did just a few moments ago, one will find it still on Twitter, not from two hours ago or even two weeks ago, but from two years ago. I say that that is a disgrace, especially after the matter has been raised by a Committee of this House.

Although hate speech makes up a very small proportion of the overall traffic on social networking sites, when we live our lives more and more online, and this speech exists online in a way that does not exist in the street or in the way we speak to one another, there is a risk that it becomes normalised and gives a licence to others to repeat it and to do worse.
I turn to the other factor—extremism. The issue does not stop at hate speech. Just as social media are used by people to advertise holidays and beauty products, they are used by those who want to advertise terrorism. It is no exaggeration to say that Daesh has run the most successful propaganda campaign since Goebbels in Nazi Germany, yet Daesh has a much wider audience because of the reach of social media. It has managed to persuade people who enjoy all the rights and privileges that we enjoy in this country to travel to Syria to work with a barbarous medieval regime or to commit atrocities here in Europe, like those which we saw in Nice and appear to have seen in Berlin.

I am not going to overstate my case and blame all of this on social media, because that is certainly not the reality, but I am going to say that young people in Britain today are being radicalised in their bedrooms, and the gateway to a lot of the radical material online is the common social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. In addition to being a conduit through which extremists are recruited, social media are used by Daesh and its supporters to generate propaganda to attract support and funds. Social media platforms that are used by millions of our constituents every minute of every day are being abused by people who want to peddle extremism and hate. What are social media companies doing about that? The answer is, far too little. I have not heard one Member of this House demur from that proposition.

I am not sure that we, as a society, should accept the proposition that organisations such as social media companies should be allowed to create something to make money that has the potential to do harm, or at least to facilitate harm, and then claim that because it has become so big, it is unreasonable to expect them to do more to prevent that harm. I say that the polluter should pay.

Who is left to pick up the pieces? The police. With the Home Affairs Committee and the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who was then our Chair, I visited Scotland Yard to see the unit where dozens of officers spend all day every day going through Twitter, Facebook and other social networking sites to flag up this material. They do that not really for any law enforcement purpose—they are not there to apply for a court order—but merely so that they can tell Twitter, in particular, that something violates its own in-house terms of use. To its credit, Twitter often removes that material, but why should the police have to do the searching? The Committee also visited The Hague, where Europol has a similar unit for non-English language material. My question is this: why should our constituents’ taxes be used to fund our police to do the work that social media companies should be doing themselves?

My father, who passed away three years ago this week, was fond of quoting Margaret Thatcher. I have not been able to verify this quote, but she once said that she did not like people coming to her with problems but no solutions. I will therefore present three options in the few minutes remaining. The first is to consider legislation. The most straightforward approach would be to make social media companies liable for what they allow or enable to be published on their platforms. For other reasons, including libel and copyright law, that would be devastating for those companies; they do not want it to happen. The German Government announced only last week that they will consider legislating for fines of up to half a million euros for social media companies that fail to remove within 24 hours posts that breach Germany’s hate speech laws. We can be emboldened by the fact that our friends and allies in Europe are considering legislation.

The second option is to encourage social action. Social media companies rely on their members seeing the advertising from which they make money. If we voted with our feet, they would not be able to survive. If we, as users of social media—most, if not all of us are—make it clear that we would not stand for hate speech or extremism on those platforms, that would send a very clear message.

The third option, which I favour, is that social media companies get their own house in order, take a bit of responsibility and, for once, show some real leadership. They could establish, or at least fund, a not-for-profit organisation that employs people to identify and remove offending posts, that uses and develops their technological brilliance in order to filter out that material for manual checking, and that has police officers stationed there, paid for by that organisation, to gather intelligence and progress any cases that need legal input. There is a model for that in the National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children in Washington, DC, which I have had the fortune to visit. It is a not-for-profit organisation, funded by the technology sector—in large part by Facebook and Google—that tackles, among other things, online child exploitation. Why can that not apply to online hate speech and extremism?

I suggest that social media companies go away for Christmas, have a long, hard think and come back early in the new year with a proper proposal for an organisation of that kind, so that they can tackle online extremism and hate speech. If they do not do so, they should expect to be scrutinised in this House and for there to be concerted calls for legislation to make them do so in 2017.

On that note, I wish you, Mr Speaker, and everyone else present a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

5.40 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), who gave an excellent speech. He is right to have raised the problems of extremism and hate crime on the world wide web. I had to step out during the debate because I was leading my own debate on the tragic death of Brandon Singh Rayat, a 15-year-old boy who committed suicide because of the cyber-bullying he had experienced, and I am glad his parents are in the Public Gallery, as they were earlier in Westminster Hall.

The hon. Gentleman is right that leadership needs to be shown on this issue. There has been a succession of reports by the Home Affairs Committee, one them co-authored by the Deputy Leader of the House before he was promoted to his august position. The tragedy is that these things are not followed up—an excuse is always given. The hon. Gentleman’s example of the organisation, funded by the companies, that can professionally monitor what is going on, rather than people having to try to find out who in California they should speak to if they want something removed from
the net, is a very good one. Rather than serving on the Home Affairs Committee, he should be giving evidence to it on this important point. I hope he will put his example to the Committee when it next meets.

In the few moments I have to speak in this traditional debate, I want to raise a few of my passions. First, as I said, I am glad to see the parents of Brandon Singh Rayat here. I hope the debate will lead to Mina Rayat being able to pursue her important campaign on cyber-bullying, which she launched two weeks ago, and that she will continue with it. When someone loses a child of 15—some of us in the House today are parents—it must be an unspokenable tragedy for them, and this campaign will give hope to families in a similar position.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned support for his local police service. When the Deputy Leader of the House comes to reply, I hope he will give us some good news about an issue that still concerns me: the Government’s failure to announce the police funding formula for not just the Leicestershire constabulary but the police service throughout the country. The former policing Minister, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning), said the review of the police funding formula had been paused until the National Police Chiefs Council had completed its investigation into policing capabilities. We now know that Sara Thornton, the chair of the council, has said there is nothing to stop the review from proceeding at the same time as her capabilities review. It would therefore be good to find out when constabularies such as Leicestershire and Buckinghamshire, London boroughs such as Kingston and, indeed, Northern Ireland—although I think there is probably a different formula there—will know precisely how much money the police will have to spend.

As is my custom, I want to mention diabetes; I would be missing an opportunity if I did not. There is a time of year when people eat a lot of sugar, mince pies, cakes and things of that kind, as I have just done—I will have my metformin shortly to compensate. It is important to look at the variations in care for diabetes. Diabetes UK published a very interesting report with the all-party group on diabetes, which I am privileged to chair. The report was launched by the Health Secretary recently and pointed out that people are able to get structured education and care in certain parts of the country but not in others.

If, when I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, I had been sent off to the gym instead of being sent to the pharmacy to get my metformin and my other tablets, perhaps I would have prevented its onset. It would have come eventually, I know, because my mother had diabetes as well, but that might have prevented for a little longer its taking hold of my system. We should look at ways of saving money in the long term by spending more money now, and that means through structured education.

A number of my constituents will be heading off to India because the Indian Government have decided to recall the 1,000 rupee note, which is worth about £10, and the 500 rupee note, which is worth only £5, as part of their campaign to root out corruption in India. A number of British Indians came back with rupees when they last visited the country. When we go abroad we change our money and sometimes do not change it back over there but bring it back with us. A lot of my constituents, and indeed other members of the British Indian community, are having to change their money by 31 December, so many of them have very quickly decided to go back in order to bank it before it ceases to be legal tender. It is as though we had gone abroad with our £20 notes and suddenly the British Government had announced, “The £20 notes are no longer legal tender—please come back and bank them before 31 December.”

I wrote to the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, about the issue. He wrote back to tell me that if the Indian Government agreed, he would be quite happy for the rupees to be banked in an Indian bank in the United Kingdom to save my British Indian constituents, and others, from having to go all the way back to India. A lot of cricket supporters who have just gone over to India for the cricket matches have changed their pounds into rupees and now cannot change them back, so this is a good way of proceeding.

I wonder whether the Deputy Leader of the House could speak to the Foreign Secretary; I wrote to him some time ago to ask the British Government to contact the Indian Government to enable the notes to be banked in the United Kingdom. There are eight Indian banks in Leicester East; I am sure that the Deputy Leader of the House has one or two in Northampton North. This is an opportunity to save a lot of money for people who would otherwise have to go all the way back to India just to put their money in the bank.

I have two final points, one of which is about Yemen. There is tragedy in Syria. The tragedies in Berlin and Turkey are terrible events that have shocked the whole world, but the situation in Yemen has now been ongoing for 15 months. Mr Speaker, you kindly granted an urgent question last week when we looked at the situation in Yemen, and the situation is not improving. The basic foods are not available. As I said to the Prime Minister when she gave her statement on the European Council on Monday, citizens in Hudaydah are eating grass and drinking sea water. The ports are closed and the airport is closed, so wheat cannot be brought into Yemen. Without wheat, people will not be able to survive.

This is not about a lack of aid. I thank you again, Mr Speaker, for coming to the Yemen day that we held last week, where we met members of the Yemen diaspora. Eight aid agencies were there, together with a Minister of State at the Department for International Development and a Foreign Office Minister, and we heard from the UN Deputy Secretary-General. Unless the ports and the airport are opened, humanitarian aid cannot be got in. The appeal launched last week by the Disasters Emergency Committee on the BBC has raised a lot of money, but there is no point in just having the money; it has to be spent on the people in Hudaydah and in other parts of Yemen. I very much hope that we will pursue the cause of a ceasefire.

Finally, let me say why I will remember 2016 as a good year. There are lots of reasons why I might not remember it as being particularly riveting, but for one reason I will: the victory of Leicester City football club as the English champions. It was one of those great events. I am not going to say that it will never happen again, because we do not know what happened to Mr Gary Lineker. Full marks to him for wearing only his underwear, as he promised he would do, when he lost his bet with the nation.
My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is a Leicester City supporter—he supports the foxes. Every time I go to a match at the King Power stadium, I bring him back a programme. People wonder why I take two programmes and I always say that one of them is for him, so he has a collection that is as good, if not better, than mine. A number of other Members also support Leicester City football club. This was our year—it was a fantastic year—and that is why I was so pleased to support Leicester City football club. This was our year—it is not better, than mine. A number of other Members also support the foxes. Every time I go to a match at the King Power stadium, I bring him back a programme. People wonder which all our ambitions and dreams can be fulfilled.

Jim Shannon: Did Arsenal win anything?

Keith Vaz: I was going to say something about Arsenal—I thank my hon. Friend—because, of course, Mr Speaker is a great supporter of theirs. What unites us, of course, is that we do not really want to see Chelsea win the league. I think that it is Arsenal’s turn, but every time they get to the top of the premier league, something goes wrong. This year, we will keep our fingers crossed—not just for Mr Speaker, but for young Oliver, who can recite the players’ names backwards and forwards in the blink of an eye. Of course, we will carry on winning the premier league, but we would like to share it; it is only fair that we should give it to another team. This week I will place a bet on Leicester winning the champions league, because I am hopeful that we will proceed. That is what 2017 will be all about for me.

May I end by wishing you, Mr Speaker, the staff of the House, the Deputy Leader of the House, Ministers and colleagues on both sides of the House a very happy Christmas? I understand that it was an old tradition—I wonder whether this is in “Erskine May”—that whoever wound up this debate for the Government always ensured that every Member who was still in the House when it rose for the Christmas recess would get a mince pie. I do not know whether you have heard that particular story, Mr Speaker, but one of the Doorkeepers mentioned it to me, so I am looking forward to visiting the rooms of the Deputy Leader of the House at the end of the day and getting one. Let us hope that 2017 is a great year in which all our ambitions and dreams can be fulfilled.

5.52 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), even though I am an Arsenal supporter, like you, Mr Speaker. I congratulate Leicester City on their fine achievement earlier this year.

At the beginning of last week, I was in Berlin with the Parliament choir and it was a great honour to sing in the Bundestag building. It is with great sadness that we heard of the terrible event last night. I am sure that all members of the Parliament choir and others who were in Berlin at the time—my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) was there with the Communities and Local Government Committee—will wish to pass on our condolences to the people of Germany.

Stafford has this year seen some great developments economically. General Electric, which took over the business of Alstom in Stafford and elsewhere, has almost completed the construction of its first new factory, which contains its automation business. After the referendum, it decided to go ahead with the construction of its second new factory in Stafford, on the Redhill business park, and that will deal with its high-voltage direct current business. Stafford is a world leader in that regard and I welcome that development.

I also welcome a Chinese institution’s investment in the site of the former campus of Staffordshire University, which it vacated in order to go to Stoke-on-Trent earlier this year. A new university will be established in Stafford, alongside an international school. I welcome the continuance of higher education in Stafford provided by Keele University through its medical school and, indeed, by Staffordshire University, which maintains another campus in the town.

It was announced this year that the Ministry of Defence would further expand its site in Stafford to welcome more servicemen and women in the coming years, and I very much welcome that. Stafford has a great tradition of hosting the armed forces, both the RAF and the Army, and the arrival last year of two new regiments—1 Signals and 16 Signals—to join 22 Signals has made a great and positive difference to our town.

Our IT sector in Stafford is expanding, as are many small and medium-sized businesses. As it is Christmas time, I want to pay particular tribute to those who run small and medium-sized businesses. Year in, year out, those people work 60, 70 or 80 hours a week running businesses, employing people and paying their taxes. They are not much sung about, and they often have to deal with a lot of hassle, but they get on with the job of providing jobs and, to a large extent, they keep this country going. More than 50% of jobs in this country are created and sustained by the small and medium-sized businesses in all our constituencies.

I want to say a little about the sustainability and transformation programme for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, which I have raised in the House on a couple of occasions. I approach this in a positive spirit. We need a transformation of our care, and there are many good ideas in the programme. I wish that the leadership of the programme had engaged more with Members of Parliament; we have had one or two meetings, but sadly the suggestions that I put forward were not taken up. I believe that the leadership needs to listen much more to Members of Parliament as they take this further forward.

I have already mentioned the suggestion that one of the accident and emergency departments in Stoke and Staffordshire should close. I believe that that is absolutely wrong and will not benefit my constituents or those of the other Members of Parliament in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. I will take the matter up, as I did with the Secretary of State this morning, at every opportunity. However, I believe that some positive work is being done, and I urge those involved to engage with local Members of Parliament.

The issue that really concerns me, as it does a lot of Members, is social care. Staffordshire has been warned this week that social care homes in the private sector across the county are being closed because it is simply unaffordable for them to continue. That is partly a consequence of matters that have gone on for quite a long time, but it is partly a consequence of the living wage. We have to bear in mind that most of those who work in the care sector are on approximately...
the minimum wage. They have, rightly, received a pay rise through the living wage, but there has not been a corresponding increase in the amount paid to care homes for the provision of services.

In Staffordshire, the better care fund has not worked as it should have done this year. Fifteen million pounds was supposed to go into improving care, but it has been retained in the health service. That happened for understandable reasons, but it has caused a great shortfall for the county council. I hope that that will be remedied, to some extent, for the coming year.

We now face a crisis in the funding of social care—indeed, in the funding of health and social care—and we need a long-term solution. Many Members from all parts of the House have raised this on numerous occasions, and I have certainly done so over the last two or three years. The time has come for action. We cannot have more sticking-plaster remedies. The announcements made by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government last week were very welcome, and I support them, but they are sticking plasters in the context of the sums of money required.

I want briefly to mention transport in my area. I have asked the Secretary of State for Transport to meet me to discuss the road system in Staffordshire, particularly in Stafford. I have done so for a couple of reasons. Although I welcome the improvements that will shortly be made to the M6 between junctions 13 and 15, those improvements, which will take at least two years, will inevitably have a knock-on impact on other roads in the area. We need to ensure that those improvements are made in the most efficient and effective way, with the least disruption.

A much more serious matter is the potential for disruption that may be caused by the construction of HS2 phase 2a if the HS2 Bill passes through the Houses of Parliament in the coming 12 to 15 months. The line cuts across all the major north-south transport routes in Staffordshire, which are the national north-south routes in the west of the country, and unless we think about this and alternatives are planned well in advance—how it will be planned, when road closures will happen, when work is to be done—there will be chaos for not just a couple of years, but many years. I urge the Government to think about that in advance. They may say, “Well, it hasn’t passed Parliament yet, and we can’t do anything about it until then”, but that is absolutely not the approach to take. We must think about this now, because the consequences—for not just Staffordshire and Stoke, but the entire west midlands and north-west economy—could be quite serious.

I would like to see progress on other issues that I have raised in the House during the past year. The first is the issue of hoists in hotel rooms for disabled people. I was surprised to me when my constituent Daniel Baldawi pointed out that it is not a requirement even for major hotels and chains to have hoists in one or two rooms so that disabled people can enjoy the benefits of staying in them. I have written to many chains: some have come back to me with very positive replies, but others have not done so. I would like it to be standard in every hotel constructed in this country—indeed, hotels already in existence if they are above a certain size—to have hoists available in some rooms.

Following the tragic loss of two lives in Stafford two years ago, I have raised the issue of fireworks and the inspection of facilities containing fireworks. It is quite extraordinary that responsibility for inspecting facilities that can contain almost as much explosive, or gunpowder, as Guy Fawkes had when he wanted to blow up this place are regulated by local authorities. Local authorities may be very good at other things, but they simply do not have such expertise. I want any major facility—with upwards of a few tens or hundreds of kilos of explosives—to be regulated by the Health and Safety Executive or possibly the fire and rescue authorities, which have the experience to make judgments on such matters.

A couple of weeks ago in Westminster Hall, we had an excellent debate, which I was privileged to lead, on the ivory trade. The request was made to the Government that the United Kingdom should end the trade in ivory. I spent many years of my life in Tanzania, which has suffered a huge depletion in the number of its elephants, so this is a very personal matter for me. I know that the Government are looking at it and will hold a consultation early in the new year, but I hope that they will broaden the scope of the consultation so that all trade in ivory ceases, with the few sensible exceptions that were raised in the debate.

The final issue that I have raised in the House during the past year is that of employment and support allowance for those in the work-related activity group. A lot of colleagues on both sides of the House have concerns about this. The Government promised to come up with measures that would to some extent compensate for the loss of the additional money for those joining that group from April, but we have yet to hear about concrete measures that I believe will be satisfactory. I hope the Government will take another look at this issue.

I want very briefly to mention international development, particularly in relation to Syria. With colleagues on the International Development Committee, I was privileged to see the work that the UK Government are doing with the incredibly generous Governments and people of Lebanon and Jordan, as well as those of Turkey, Egypt and Iraq, which we were not able to visit, who are hosting millions of refugees and providing education for their children—so much so, that in Lebanon there will shortly be more Syrian refugee children than Lebanese children in its state schools. That is an example of the excellent work done through the international development budget. It has received a lot of criticism in the press in recent days and it is quite right that we should investigate all those issues, but we should never forget the tremendous work done through that budget and the support given to the marvellous people who help those who are in the most difficult of circumstances.

With that, Mr Speaker, I wish you and all the staff a very happy Christmas and a blessed new year.

6.4 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow so many distinguished speakers this afternoon. In particular, I would like to add my agreement to the arguments put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) and my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) about the concern that some of our...
servicemen seem to be being treated more adversely than some suspected and, indeed, convicted terrorists. I hope those concerns are heard not only by the Government but by the devolved Administration in Northern Ireland.

One of the joys of our role as Members of Parliament is being able to work with so many community organisations that, all year round, do such valuable work for people who are often the most vulnerable in our society. During a public service and volunteering week I held earlier in the autumn, I had the pleasure of spending some time with a range of organisations, including Age UK, the Springboard Centre, Black Country Food Bank, the dementia unit and A&E volunteers at Russells Hall hospital and the West Midlands police.

At Christmas in particular we value the role of our community organisations, but they do such work all year round. It is very difficult to pick out any one individual example above any other but it would be remiss of me not to highlight Wordsley community centre in my constituency, led by the formidable Janet Blakeway, and its work to improve the centre’s accessibility. I recently launched its new stair lift, which had been made possible by Janet’s work to bring in local firms, CE Solutions and Handicare, to do the work for the local community, really transforming the services that are on offer.

The big society may have passed into political history as a buzzword, but the work that so many unheralded volunteers and community organisations do—every day of the week, every week of the year—continues regardless of passing fads in our political lexicon. Some argue that, in the selfish age in which we are supposed to live, people are no longer interested in working for a community, giving up their time or supporting good causes. That is certainly not my experience from the support for the Macmillan coffee morning or the community clean-ups we have held in Dudley South, which have been extremely well supported by the community. I hope that the Government will continue to look at how they can make it easier for people to give up their time and for businesses to donate resources and skills to help the communities around them.

I am particularly pleased to see a growing number of friends’ groups supporting our local parks and green spaces; at a time when local authorities are having to look at how and where they can dedicate resources, communities are saying that these things are important to them and going out and taking practical action. Most recently in Dudley South, the Friends of Cot Lane Park group was formed a month or so ago on a wet Wednesday evening, but still attracted 60 people from local estates. The group was formed in response to damage and disruption caused following an unauthorised Traveller camp at the park.

The Black country has seen an unusual number of unauthorised Traveller camps over the summer and into the early autumn. Many have been responsible and considerate to local neighbours, but sadly some have behaved criminally. There has been disruption and criminal damage and police have reported not only robberies but violent crimes. While local authorities in my own borough of Dudley and neighbouring boroughs have pursued successive magistrates court orders, those who seek to take advantage of the system know that that means that they have at least seven days before they have to worry about it. As a result, some of the less responsible and considerate groups have merely gone from one park or play area to the next, causing the same damage and disruption at each.

I hope that the Government will look again at practical questions such as whether authorised land for Traveller camps can be pooled so that local authorities can come together to make adequate provision across a wider area rather than in a single authority area, and whether it is time to allow local authorities to designate particular land or categories of land as sites where unauthorised camps attract criminal penalties and the realities that go with that. Of course we must always consider the genuine human rights of Traveller communities, but they must always be balanced with the legitimate rights of settled communities.

I was pleased that the then Chancellor was able to announce in the Budget in March this year the approval of the enterprise zone in my constituency. We are still waiting for the final approval of the business case, and I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will make inquiries about it so that the new jobs, investment and increased prosperity can come into my constituency and benefit not only those whom I represent but those in neighbouring constituencies.

Similarly, the Government have signed off the extension to the metro network between Wednesbury and Brierley Hill in my constituency. It is being undertaken by the new West Midlands combined authority, meaning that it can go ahead sooner than expected. I hope that the Government will give serious consideration to extending it further to Stourbridge so that the tram link can connect back in with the main-line rail network and people can enjoy some of the benefits of HS2 connectivity.

The final theme I want to raise before the House adjourns for the Christmas recess is the need to work to ensure that everyone in our communities has the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed. I have been lucky enough to visit every school in my constituency since I was elected last May. Clearly there is much excellent teaching and school management around Dudley and the wider Black country. It is important that I make that point because my wife has recently returned to the classroom and I know that she is listening; it could be a cold Christmas if I forget to emphasise that.

Invictus Education Trust and Windsor Academy Trust in my constituency are showing the power of schools working in partnership to drive up standards. However, across the wider Black Country, Ofsted has raised serious concerns with the four local authorities. Children in those areas start below the national average, but sadly they slip further behind across key stages 1 to 4. The performance, sadly, is less good than similar local authorities elsewhere in the country with similar levels of deprivation, so we really need to consider how we can ensure no child is left behind, whichever part of the country they live in. High-performing schools and academy trusts must be able to innovate, so we can have more diversity and tailored education provision in state schools. The Invictus Trust, which has one school in my constituency, is preparing plans for a specialist secondary school that incorporates part of an almost military-style curriculum, together with core EBacc subjects, to really target those in danger of becoming disengaged with the education system. I hope the Government will give that serious consideration when the application is submitted.
As I said, we have a lot of talent in our schools. I saw that recently when I received a letter from India, Thea and Jasmine from Belle Vue primary school about the scourge of modern slavery. I have taken up this issue with Ministers, and I know the Deputy Leader of the House has done a lot of work on it in the past. The quality of the letter and the depth of understanding it demonstrated, not only of the slave trade in the early 19th century and the abolition of slavery in the United States but how it affects our communities now, was remarkable for primary school children.

You will be aware of the talent of some of my constituents, Mr Speaker, from the Christmas card I hope you received, which showcased the artistic talents of Alex Maher and Lucy Hannon of Maidensbridge primary school, William Hetheridge of Glynne primary school, Millie Millard of Ashwood Park primary school, Tia Worrell of St Mary’s Church of England primary school, Thomas Pinches of The Brier school and Reggie of Netherton Church of England primary school. I am delighted that the seven excellent entries were all able to go on the Christmas card. Merry Hill shopping centre in my constituency was so impressed with the standard of the entries that it has put them on display, so that people doing their last-minute Christmas shopping can see just how many talented artists we have in Dudley South.

I think that is a good point on which to finish. I again wish you a very merry Christmas, Mr Speaker, and best wishes for the new year.

6.17 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I want to speak today about just one issue of great concern, which is how negatively the proposed new national funding formula for schools will impact on schools in my Congleton constituency if it is not revised. It is critical for the children of my constituency that it is.

Prior to the announcement last week, my constituency schools were already among the poorest-funded in the country. We therefore expected a good funding increase. After this announcement, however, headteachers tell me that theirs will be the very worst-funded schools in the country. The most poorly funded local authority used to be £4,158 per head, but this will now be Cheshire East, at £4,122 per head. Imagine my heads’ consternation last week when they discovered that their funding will not increase, but actually drop. I use the word consternation; they used the word outrage. No wonder that within 48 hours of the announcement no fewer than five headteachers came to my constituency office to express their utter dismay.

A year ago, I took a group of headteachers to meet the former Education Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), to ensure that he heard directly their concerns on the poor funding for Cheshire East schools, and to implore him that the new formula must address them. And this was after a similar meeting in the previous Parliament, when Cheshire East local authority officers met his predecessor for the same purpose. In addition, hundreds of my constituents signed a petition for fairer funding. This issue is far from new, which is why last week’s announcement was so shocking.

My headteachers are asking how Cheshire East has become the most poorly funded area, after they made such a convincing case to the Minister at their meeting. They thought they had been heard. I, too, find it difficult to understand.

What is particularly concerning is that these are some of highest-performing schools in the country, but there is a point at which their laudable level of achievement cannot be maintained. Only yesterday, the Secretary of State said in this place that she had been able to ensure that underfunded areas would be able to “gain up to 3%” over 2018-19 and 2019-20. My schools are facing exactly the opposite—not a rise of 3%, as the majority of my high schools face a reduction of 2.9%.

Before I relay some of the unpalatable options facing headteachers in my constituency, let me set in context last week’s announcement, because a number of other factors make the funding reductions for my schools far worse. First, the National Audit Office has said that schools face a reduction of 8% in funding in real terms by 2020, due chiefly to unfunded increases in employer costs. That makes the average savings to be found not over 2%, but over 10%. In addition, the reduction in the educational services grant will mean a further hit for academies in my constituency, which means all seven high schools. Even graver, there is still no local plan in Cheshire East, which has led to hundreds of new houses being built without additional funding for the proportionate increase in the number of children attending schools. This effect of so-called “lagging” means that schools are required to educate additional children with no additional funding.

What do headteachers tell me will be the effect of this new formula on their schools? With reference to the primary schools, Martin Casserley, headteacher at Black Firs Primary School, says they will be forced into significant reductions, including reducing support staff to help special educational needs children.

The high schools will lose £800,000 a year between them. Eaton Bank alone will face losses of £300,000 over three years. Headteacher Ed O’Neill says this would be “deeply damaging” and “the removal of the educational services grant...and the NAO-calculated pressures mean that total savings of 12% will have to be found.”

Richard Middlebrook, head of Alsager High, who was nominated for headteacher of the year and is a national leader of education, says that the only way to survive would be to open for only four days a week, narrow the curriculum or close the sixth form—all completely implausible.

Dennis Oliver, headteacher of Holmes Chapel High, also a national leader of education, is looking at the removal of all teaching assistant posts, or the loss of all technicians, or the loss of eight non-viable sixth-form groups, or removing heating and lighting for a year or removing general resources for children, such as paper and books. John Leigh, head at Sandbach High and a long-established Ofsted inspector, tells me he risks losing his school’s “outstanding” status. He now has a £200,000 deficit as a result of lagging funding, due to new housing in Sandbach. He believes that the only feasible way to run the school would be to remove the rich programme of extracurricular activities, reduce the curriculum offer...
and/or reduce the number of sixth-form classes. He is already teaching 12 hours of maths a week himself to help balance the budget.

Sarah Burns, headteacher at Sandbach Boys School, has calculated that losing the entire music, art, business studies or geography departments could achieve the reductions, but that is simply not possible for a school that is a regional leader in music and the creative arts. She is concerned about the recruitment and retention of key staff while managing a reduction of 2.9% and she calculates it will actually be 5%, taking other factors into account.

David Hermitt, chief executive officer of Congleton Multi-Academy Trust, of which I am a patron, is facing a reduction of 2.4% at Congleton High, but he tells me that in addition he has been educating over 50 children every year for free for the last three years due to the increased housing nearby, equating to over £200,000 per year of missing funding in each of the last three years. This has depleted healthy reserves. He says the school has made every cut it can to ensure that it has a balanced budget. He says that, “we have increased average class sizes, removed some subjects from our post 16 provision, increased contact time for teachers and reduced the amount spent on books and computer equipment.”

I am proud to be patron for this well-run multi-academy trust, which is already helping to drive down back-office costs for the three schools in the trust by providing central services of finance and human resources.

Middlewich High faces even deeper reductions as a result of the change in funding for children with special educational needs and disabilities, for which it has a dedicated unit. It is a lead school for emotional health, and Members may recall that during Prime Minister’s questions recently, I drew attention to its outstanding work with the most vulnerable students and families. However, Keith Simpson, its headteacher, has said, “as Head I have no option but to reduce staffing from this area in order to meet a minimum number of teachers to provide a curriculum.”

He added:

“This is alongside the shortfall in SEND funding for schools that maintain a truly inclusive intake. This short-term view will only store up problems for society and other services in the long term. I feel that the holistic support for children and families is being sacrificed and has no educational value in raising standards for our most vulnerable students.”

Those headteachers, whom I know well, are utterly dedicated and professional, but the concerns that I have expressed on their behalf today have been increasing for several years. They have concluded that the proposed national fairer funding formula is not fit for purpose, certainly in Cheshire East. They are asking the Government to go back to the drawing board after listening to the outcome of the current consultation, and I am asking for the concerns that I have expressed today to be included in that consultation. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will refer them to the Schools Minister, and will convey my request for an early meeting with him to which those headteachers will travel at short notice; and I hope that the Schools Minister will not just hear but act, by reviewing the impact of the new funding formula on the schools in my constituency.

Without such a review, there will be grave implications for the education and life chances of the children about whom those headteachers care so deeply.

I wish you, Mr Speaker, and all Members in the Chamber a happy and restful Christmas.

6.26 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to make my debut appearance as shadow Deputy Leader of the House to respond to the Christmas Adjournment debate. I believe that the House is at its best when Members raise such a huge number of issues. However, I am conscious that, apart from the Deputy Leader of the House, I am all that stands between Members and their Christmas recess, so I shall be as brief as possible in expressing my thoughts about the debate that we have enjoyed this afternoon.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) opened the debate by remembering those who are less fortunate than ourselves—a very important message at Christmas—and the plight of those who are homeless. I add my thanks to Crisis, which does amazing work throughout the year but particularly at Christmas, and give credit to the last Labour Government, who did so much to tackle rough sleeping.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) raised important issues, including drug addiction and sprinklers in schools. She also spoke about jobs in her constituency; she is a tireless advocate for the people of North Tyneside.

The right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) raised a subject that certainly interested me, namely the plight of his constituents who travel to London by rail. He said that their trains were now 30 years old. I see his challenge, and I raise him the class 37s, which are 1960s locos. They are used by many commuters between Barrow and Preston, and they frequently break down. I should also note at this point that they are magnificent engines, because last time I raised the issue in the House, many train enthusiasts berated me somewhat on Twitter. Those engines would make a great addition to any museum. All that my Fleetwood constituents would like for Christmas, however, is a rail line to Fleetwood.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) spoke of the workers who are receiving a pay cut this Christmas. She is a tireless advocate for the workers in her constituency, and today she raised the important issue of retail workers, for whom Christmas is often bittersweet. The hours and the money that they can earn until Christmas are great, but January often comes with a reduction in hours and a pay cut.

The hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) informed the House of a drama that was unfolding in his constituency, which he described as the end of local democracy. Many of my constituents might argue that that has already happened, given that fracking is being forced on the people of Lancashire.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) addressed the issues facing our country. He has clearly reflected on events over the past 12 months, and I concur with his call for the rejection of post-truth politics. We should all commit ourselves to putting the “united” back into the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) talked about road transport infrastructure issues in his constituency. As we are now making our Christmas lists, I would certainly like to add the A585 to my wish list for the road to Fleetwood.
My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) raised the issue of hysterectomies. This was the third occasion on which she raised it in the House; and the Deputy Leader of the House will now raise it with the Department of Health.

The hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) raised the iniquity, also raised by the hon. Member for Ilford North (SWAYBURN) and the ex-service personnel who serve in Northern Ireland, and I am sure that the Deputy Leader of the House will expand on that in his remarks.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) reminded the House of the real reason for Christmas: the greatest gift ever given, the birth of Jesus Christ. He remembered all the persecuted Christians around the world. It is an issue he feels very strongly about, and probably sometimes finds overwhelming to deal with, so my Christmas gift to him is 1 John 4:4: “because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”

I hope that offers him some comfort this Christmas.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) spoke very eloquently about the shame faced by our constituents who face DWP assessments and the fantastic Ken Loach film “I, Daniel Blake”. If anyone has any difficulty with their assessment, I would make that exercise.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) reflected on bereavement, which is often felt more acutely at Christmas than at any other time of the year. I am pleased he found the opportunity to mention the work of his local hospice. Indeed, if I was not at this debate, I would have been at St John’s hospice in Lancaster, where students from Beaumont College were doing a Christmas performance. Instead, I will be visiting Brian House children’s hospice in Blackpool tomorrow.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) talked about Sea View Street in his constituency, which was a winner at the British high street awards last week. While his constituency may well have won the No. 1 result on the east coast, I recognise he had the opportunity to mention the work of his local hospice. Indeed, if I was not at this debate, I would have been at St John’s hospice in Lancaster, where students from Beaumont College were doing a Christmas performance. Instead, I will be visiting Brian House children’s hospice in Blackpool tomorrow.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) talked about hate speech and abuse on social media. I am sure no Member of this House is unaware of the things that go on on social media—the anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism, sexism and all the other forms of hate we see there. Last week I reported a comment on Facebook that was made about a person who is a democratically elected politician in this country. The quote was, “Shout the bastard between the eyes and two bullets to the heart, will cure the problem.”

Within hours I heard back from Facebook that that did not breach its terms and conditions. That is absolutely a death threat, and I am continuing to pursue that with Facebook.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) raised a number of issues that he is passionate about, including cyber-bullying, the police funding formula, diabetes, Yemen and world fisheries. Of course, 2016 was indeed a fine year for Leicester City, but it has also been a fine year for the mighty Barrow, who beat a league side away for the first time in 44 years. If there are any Bristol Rovers fans in the House, I can only apologise for what was clearly a very embarrassing defeat in the FA cup.

As we reflect on the year past, may I join Members who remembered our friend and colleague Jo Cox? In Jo’s maiden speech, she reminded us that we have “more in common than that which divides us”—[Official Report, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

and as we adjourn for the Christmas recess, we remember all those Members of the House, and indeed our constituents, who come from many different faith and cultural backgrounds but are all in the same way British. So may I take this opportunity, Madam Deputy Speaker, to wish you a happy Christmas, but to wish the Deputy Leader of the House a happy Hanukkah? In my household we will be celebrating both festivals, and anyone who has ever seen “The O.C.” will know that Christmas is a thing; it is a merger of both festivals.

So whatever Members of this House are celebrating as we break for the Christmas recess, may I wish them a very happy Christmas and a very peaceful new year, and extend that to the staff who work for us, the staff of the House, and all those who work here and all our constituents?

6.34 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure to appear before you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and opposite the shadow Deputy Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who gave a consummate first performance. The shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), called me “suave” in the Chamber last week—the hon. Lady’s impressive skills of discernment are now evident for all to see—and I was rather disappointed at first that she was not in the Chamber today, but I welcome the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood to her place. She need only follow the example of the shadow Leader of the House to do extremely well. This debate provides an excellent opportunity to cover an unrestricted panorama of subjects without being checked by Mr Speaker for want of relevance. In the spirit of Christmas and in his absence, I want to refer to Mr Speaker and his awesome memory and attention to detail, which do this House proud.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) spoke about those less fortunate than ourselves. I commend him on the work that he has done and is doing on the Homelessness Reduction Bill, which is making good progress. I am told that it is the longest-ever private Member’s Bill—quite an achievement—and he has clearly done tremendous work in this area. His work with faith groups across our communities is also much appreciated and extremely impressive.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) spoke about drug deaths being at record levels and the importance of treatment for those who have become addicted to illegal narcotics. She made powerful points, just as she did about fire safety in schools.
My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers) spoke about the digitisation of the tax system and the Federation of Small Businesses’ estimation of the costs. She also spoke of the cost for entrepreneurs. However, it is a voluntary pilot system, and the points that she made with her customary eloquence will be listened to. She is considering the issue with the same skill that she used as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and she will no doubt keep pursuing her theme. It is a pilot scheme, as I mentioned, so her contributions will be particularly useful in the future.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) made good points about the dangers of illicit tobacco, about which we all know. Not only is it a danger to the Treasury as it leads to a loss of revenue, but more importantly it is harmful in so many ways. It is a pilot scheme, as I mentioned, so her contributions will be particularly useful in the future.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) made good points about the dangers of illicit tobacco, about which we all know. Not only is it a danger to the Treasury as it leads to a loss of revenue, but more importantly it is harmful in so many ways. It is harmful to young people, because it may be distributed illicitly, allowing young people to access it, and it may contain unwholesome content that is obviously unregulated.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) is a senior Member from whom I have occasionally sought advice. He discussed the problems with the trains in his area—the same infrastructure failures no doubt arise elsewhere—but major investment in the line from Liverpool Street up to his part of the world is under way and there is a commitment for new trains in 2019-20. He made a valid point about the need for jam today as well as jam tomorrow. We would all like jam perhaps every day and, as a member of the “breakfast club” here in the House of Commons, he is someone who partakes of that. His constituents are well served by him, and he made some valid, sensible points about engineering work that sometimes overruns from the weekend into a Monday morning and the fact that freight trains use the line during rush hour. He also mentioned the Government’s planned digital signalling trials. He suggested that his constituency be part of the experiment area. That request will go to the Transport Secretary, because I will make sure that it does, and we will see whether that can be made to apply.

I was not aware that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) had made a music video, but I know now. Obviously, I was in a minority, because I understand that tens of thousands of people have already watched it. She spoke of our businesses and companies in this country, which of course are the engine and lifeblood of the economy. It is appropriate to thank them for the work they do, in employing people and contributing in their highly valuable way to the economy. Full-time work makes up nearly 70% of the growth in employment since 2010. I would like to say that John Lewis is a very good company, as I believe she recognised, and it has an excellent reputation, but I gently encourage all chief executives to find time to meet Members of Parliament when requests for such meetings are made, wherever possible. Her mention of the Ahmadiyya community was appreciated across the House, and I thank her for it. We certainly wish to show our support to the Ahmadiyya community in this country; although small, it is a great asset to our society.

I see my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) in his place, and I had to think hard and wonder about his speech. He referred to a “merger most foul”, and I am sorry to hear about the local difficulties in his area. I can tell Members who were not present that it was a subtle speech. He is a ferocious voice for his constituents, and those in his district really must think twice before crossing him. I shall say no more about that.

The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) mentioned that the European Union is a source of concern to him in terms of where we go from here. I assure him that Her Majesty’s Government are not going to be introspective—they are not, will not be and have not been introspective. The UK has always been an outward-looking country and we will continue to be. We should have faith, as he should, in the people of this country moving forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) spoke of the MetroBus scheme in his area, which sounds as though it will be a valuable alternative to private car journeys when it is up and running, but there has been consequent congestion and delays. He has clearly been working hard on behalf of his constituents, seeking meetings both here and in his constituency; he particularises the meetings that he has been having on this subject. Progress has apparently been made, so I was pleased to hear about that. I was also struck by what he said about his excellent son and the excellent advice he gave him. He is rightly proud of him and although I have never met his son, may I, too, say that I am proud of him, as someone who has joined Her Majesty’s armed forces recently?

The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) made powerful arguments that had the House paying close attention. The pain of the patients she spoke of undergoing these procedures is palpable. I have already instructed that the matter be raised with the Department of Health, as this issue clearly needs a response, and I will transmit that message to the right quarters. She also mentioned research into arthritis, and I undertake to look into that.

My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) spoke powerfully. May I say to him that I have briefly discussed the matter he raised—the UK soldiers being investigated—on the Front Bench with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland? First, I wish to say that Her Majesty’s armed forces have made and continue to make such a contribution to peace and stability in Northern Ireland. They will be provided, where necessary, with as much taxpayer-funded legal support as necessary. Her Majesty’s Government are aware of an imbalance in the system and, as part of addressing the legacy of the past, are looking to create a more balanced and proportionate system. I thank my hon. Friend again for his powerful contribution. The way in which he speaks and the subject matter on which he speaks always command the respect and attention of the House.

The House is richer for the presence of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He has the true affection of the House. He spoke of his love for Christmas, and how he enjoys spending Christmas with his grandchildren and the true meaning of Christmas. His powerful religious invocation struck me and I commend him not only for that but for all his work in this Chamber over the past year and throughout his time as a Member of Parliament. He does a great deal of powerful work on freedom of religion in general throughout the year, as well as for Christians persecuted around the world—sadly, the number of persecuted Christians is ever increasing.
Lady Thatcher had apparently said, “Most people bring correct, was about Lord Young of Graffham, of whom made. The anecdote to which he was referring, if I am spoke about a remark that the late Lady Thatcher had about on social media in so many quarters.

In contrast to the virulent anti-Semitism that we are hearing announced today of Rabbi Lionel Blue. He was a Committee for its work. In this context, the death was offensive anti-Semitic messages received in a short period. He referred to the 2,500 deeply Home Affairs Committee for its report on anti-Semitism.

The social media companies have a keenly about social media abuse and the prolific amount. Superintendent T unstall, whom we all wish well, spoke of Government support needed in that quarter. He actually requested lots of money for Cleethorpes he was not asking for any money. He certainly made a very attractive case.

He was not asking for any money. He certainly made a very attractive case. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), as well as giving a charming retirement message to the chief superintendent of his area, Chief Superintendent Tunstall, whom we all wish well, spoke keenly about social media abuse and the prolific amount of hate speech. The social media companies have a moral responsibility to do more.

I have not forgotten the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who spoke of the campaign against cyber-bullying and the tragedy of the loss of a boy of 15, Brandon Singh Rayat. The right hon. Gentleman does so much to raise individual cases such as that in this place, and I commend him for that. The whole House offers its sympathy to the parents of Brandon Singh Rayat who, I know, have been in the Palace of Westminster today. We send our deepest commiserations for their loss. The points that the right hon. Gentleman made reiterate the damage done to young people in particular, but to people of all ages, by cyber-bullying.

The right hon. Member for Leicester East has a tremendous history of good work on diabetes and on Yemen. To my certain knowledge he has focused on Yemen for years—for as long as I have been in the House. Now it is a cause that many are exercised by, rightly, but he has been a beacon of support for Yemen for many years. His support for Leicester football club is also widely known. He said something about mince pies. I will have to consult the Clerk about “Erskine May” on that. We will see whether that applies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) spoke of his affection for his constituency and the unsung heroes: the small and medium-sized enterprises. It is right that we talk about them, because so much work is put in by small business owners and managers, who often work all hours of the day and night and are the lifeblood of our economy. My hon. Friend made very valuable points about the ivory trade as well. His knowledge of African affairs is very impressive. I remember speaking to him a few weeks ago and I was bowled over by his knowledge of African affairs. When he speaks on the subject, he speaks with experience and persuasion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) spoke of the valuable work done by volunteers and what we can do to encourage companies to encourage volunteers to do good work. I know of one example from my own constituency: the Nationwide building society, which I think allows each of its employees three days a year to do voluntary work in their communities. They are paid by the company for those three days, as part of the company’s social action project. If more companies can do that sort of thing, it will provide encouragement for those who wish to support their community. My hon. Friend said that he had visited every school in his constituency. Someone asked from a sedentary position whether he had passed all the exams. I have no doubt that he would if he needed to.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke powerfully about school funding. I know that she will continue to fight on that subject. She is a powerful voice for her constituency, and she certainly knows how to make it heard in this place.

I take this opportunity to commend the cross-party Home Affairs Committee for its report on anti-Semitism. My hon. Friend spoke about that and I know that he is on that Committee. He referred to the 2,500 deeply offensive anti-Semitic messages received in a short period of time by one Member of this House. I commend the Committee for its work. In this context, the death was announced today of Rabbi Lionel Blue. He was a wonderful voice of reason on the airwaves, in marked contrast to the virulent anti-Semitism that we are hearing about on social media in so many quarters.

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their bearing. We remember that family at Christmas. We wish them and all our constituents, especially those who have suffered a bereavement, all the very best this Christmas and in the new year.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

Woolwich Barracks

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

6.56 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for selecting this topic as the last to be debated before the Christmas recess and, in so doing, providing me with an opportunity to put on the record my objection to the proposed closure of Woolwich barracks. As I might not get another chance, may I take this opportunity to wish you and the staff of the House a very merry Christmas?

I am also pleased to see the Minister in his place. He knows Woolwich station well, and I know that, for reasons he might touch on in his response, he is extremely fond of it. I would like to take this opportunity to let him know that the extremely courteous manner in which he has engaged with me on this issue over recent weeks has been appreciated.

There has been an unbroken military presence in Woolwich since 26 May 1716, when a royal warrant in the name of King George I authorised the formation of two permanent companies of royal artillery in the town. The Gunners’ regimental motto is “Ubique”, which as Members will know means “everywhere.” It could just as equally serve as a metaphor for the imprint of the military on Woolwich, which is visible in everything from its architecture to its street names. The King’s Troop Royal Horse Artillery are quartered in Woolwich today, maintaining a bond between our community and our armed forces that spans three centuries. In determining to sell off Woolwich barracks by 2028, the Government intend to break that bond.

There will of course be those who argue that the disposal of the barracks has been a long time coming, that we should just accept that Woolwich’s days as a garrison town are numbered, and that the focus of this debate should therefore be on the future use of the site and how we secure the optimal outcome for those affected, not whether the decision itself is the right one. If I was convinced that the Department’s case for disposal was irrefutable, that is the debate I would have called for today, but I do not. I believe that the case for disposing of Woolwich barracks has not yet been made convincingly. I hope to probe the rationale that underpins the decision and, in so doing, convince the Minister to ask his officials to revisit it.

In objecting to the closure of Woolwich barracks, I want to make it clear to the House that I do not seek to undermine the Department’s defence estate strategy in its entirety. In his statement to the House on 7 November, the Secretary of State for Defence was correct in asserting that the current estate is too big, too diffuse, too expensive and too inefficient. He was also right to argue that, as a result, it too often fails to meet the needs of our armed forces and their families.

Just as the size and structure of our armed forces have changed to meet different threats over recent decades, so it is right that the defence estate is modernised and rationalised for reasons of affordability and efficiency. I fear that that will be extremely challenging to execute in practice, but I take no issue with the strategy itself. The issue I want to raise is not whether the strategy to
reduce the MOD’s built estate is the right one, but whether it is right that the disposal of Woolwich barracks should form part of it.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Matthew Pennycook: I believe that it is not right for three main reasons. The first is that I question why the Department’s approach to Woolwich station has altered so dramatically over such a short period. It is worth recalling that it was only in 2009, in the defence estate strategy that preceded this recent one, that Woolwich station was designated a core site. Sadly, no detailed justification for that designation was given at the time, so it is impossible to know the detailed reasoning that underpinned it, but it seems reasonable to assume that there were solid strategic grounds for it.

As a core site, Woolwich station has been the recipient of significant investment over recent years. The Woolwich development project announced in 2009 provided for new and refurbished accommodation. A new, purpose-built, state-of-the-art equestrian training facility and accommodation centre was built to accommodate the King’s Troop following its transfer from St John’s Wood in February 2012. Even now, funding is in the pipeline to comprehensively remediate and reinstate the King’s Troop external exercise area on Woolwich common, following its use in the 2012 Olympic games.

I simply ask the Minister, what has changed about Woolwich in the past few years to so fundamentally alter the thinking of officials in his Department in relation to the future use of the site and to license the Government to write off the significant investment that has been ploughed into it over the past few years? It will strike many of my constituents as little more than an asset-stripping exercise driven by an analysis of rising land values in London rather than an exercise driven by the requirements of our defence estate.

The second reason relates to the first. I am not entirely convinced that the strategic case for selling off Woolwich barracks is as watertight as has been presented. In the correspondence we have exchanged over recent weeks, the Minister has assured me that the Department’s estate optimisation strategy was formulated with military advice provided by each of the front-line commands. I have no reason to question that assurance, but I do question whether the advice received was sufficiently wide in scope and, specifically, whether the Department, along with other Departments, has assessed the value of the site as a strategic resilience location outside zone 1.

Our security services have had incredible success in foiling terrorist attacks on the British mainland, but the threat to the UK from terrorism remains severe. Last night’s tragic events in Berlin are a timely reminder, if one were needed, that we can never be complacent. Lord Harris’s recently published independent review into London’s preparedness to respond to a major terrorist incident makes it clear that, while the involvement of the military in the event of a prolonged attack or a move to the critical threat level was once seen as a last resort, it is now integral to the planning process. In such a scenario, the military could now be deployed under Operation Temperer, which would allow for the mobilisation of up to 5,000 troops to increase the operational capacity and capability of specialist counter-terrorism and armed police. If they were called on, those troops would require accommodation, and there is a case for looking at Woolwich—as a strategic location outside zone 1 and close to the River Thames—as a site that can provide that necessary resilience. While I do not expect the Minister to comment publicly on such a sensitive matter, I would urge him to satisfy himself on this point by looking again at whether there is strategic value in retaining Woolwich barracks as a resilience location in response to a major terrorist incident or a comparable civil emergency.

The third and final reason is that the closure of the barracks will have a detrimental impact on my constituents and on a local community whose very history and identity are intertwined with our armed forces.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as a former member of the Royal Artillery and having done my training at Woolwich barracks for two weeks before I joined the Territorial Army. I remember the importance of not only the camp but the museum. We have lost the museum, unfortunately. I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate because this is an important matter. Does he agree that we need to retain the barracks for the core reason of looking after the MOD, looking after the Army, and ensuring that we have it there for the future? The future is uncertain, and for that reason we need Woolwich barracks.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. and, I believe, gallant Gentleman for that intervention. He is absolutely right. This is a unique site and there is good reason, given the risks of an uncertain future, to retain it. He will know that the collection that was formerly at the Firepower museum in Woolwich has been moved to Larkhill, where I know that, albeit in a different location, it will be cherished and valued. Its collection includes the many medals that have been awarded to the Gunners for outstanding acts of bravery.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The one thing that the hon. Gentleman has not mentioned is that it is incredibly historic about Woolwich is the fact that it was the original Royal Military Academy, and actually superior to Sandhurst in priority terms. Sandhurst has taken the Royal Military Academy badge from Woolwich, but Woolwich has that huge history. It is not just about the Gunners.

Matthew Pennycook: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman may know that the Woolwich academy is commonly known as “the shop”, because the first building was a converted workshop from the Royal Arsenal. It is luxury flats now. Many of my constituents are concerned that the whole area of land on which the barracks now lies will simply be sold off for housing that many of them cannot afford.

The decision to close the barracks will have a detrimental impact on the community. That impact will be felt by the whole community, not only by the staff who work at the barracks, because Woolwich has been, and remains, a garrison town. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine Woolwich
without a military presence. I recall the day in 2012 when the King’s Troop returned to Woolwich—in the words of the then commanding officer, Major Mark Edward, the “spiritual home” of the Gunners—and locals of all ages lined the streets in their thousands to welcome the troop back. That is a sign of the deep affection in which the garrison is held—an affection that has arguably only deepened in the wake of the tragic murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby on the streets of our town in May 2013.

However, it is not just a question of sentiment and identity. The regiments that are stationed at the barracks, and those that have served there in the past, have all supported the community in very practical ways. Every year, the garrison commander makes available his barrack field for an Eid-in-the-community festival that has done more than anything else to build trust and understanding between the local Muslim community and our armed forces. In the wake of Lee Rigby’s murder, that could not have been more timely. All that work—I could give numerous other examples if I had the time—will be lost, and the loss will be acutely felt by the local community, if the barracks are closed.

I finish by simply saying this: it would be a travesty if an association—a bond—between the community in Woolwich and our armed forces that has lasted for over 300 years was ended now for anything other than the most incontrovertible of reasons. For the strategic reasons I have raised, but also, unashamedly, for reasons of history, identity and sentiment, I hope that the Minister will revisit the case for disposing of the barracks and come back in the new year with a reconsidered Government position.

7.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): I congratulate the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) on obtaining this debate on the future of Woolwich barracks—an MOD site in his constituency. I thank him for his kind remarks about the manner in which I have attempted to engage with him and, indeed, other hon. Members over what I absolutely accept is a pretty constrained debate. For instance, obtaining this debate on the future of Woolwich barracks—an MOD site in his constituency. I thank him for his kind remarks about the manner in which I have attempted to engage with him and, indeed, other hon. Members.

Before I continue, I should say that, given the scale of the strategy and the fact that it will be delivered over 25 years, those plans are subject to revision, but they set out our current intentions. It is a strategy that we must deliver.

Turning to the matter at hand, as part of our strategy we have confirmed the disposal of 91 sites, including Woolwich. The decisions to dispose of those sites were made as the result of a systematic and thorough review of all of our defence assets by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, working closely alongside head office and each of the frontline commands.

When it comes to the rationale behind our decision to dispose of the Woolwich site, the reasons are many, clear and, I hope, compelling. First, selling Woolwich will contribute to our overall aim of consolidating our defence estate into fewer centres of gravity and specialisation, with better support capability. It goes without saying that, given its size and location, the site itself is not suitable to become one of those larger centres. Let me explain further. When it comes to supporting military capability, a barracks in an urban location, such as Woolwich, simply cannot compete with those located in less densely populated areas. At Bufford barracks in Wiltshire, for instance, soldiers live literally on the doorstep of Salisbury plain training area, the largest military training area in the United Kingdom, equivalent in size to the Isle of Wight. They are also located alongside other units with which they live, work and train.

By comparison with Salisbury plain’s 94,000 acres, the entire Woolwich site stands at 252 acres. That includes an outdoor training area, but one that is, as hon. Members might imagine, severely constrained. For instance, if soldiers want to practise live firing or conduct an annual personal weapons test, they must be bused an
hour and a half south to Lydd ranges on the Kent coast. What is more, when it comes to working and training, units based in Woolwich do not have the day-to-day access to other units that their colleagues elsewhere enjoy. As such, they miss out on the vital exchange of ideas and tactics that gives an Army its crucial edge.

Bob Stewart: I accept everything that the Minister has said; that is logical. What I am concerned about is this: where is a unit such as the Royal Horse Artillery, which needs to be close to central London, going to go? We have had all these facilities built in Woolwich specifically for the Royal Horse Artillery, and now, a few years after producing them, we are going to throw them all away. It does not seem to make sense to me.

Mark Lancaster: I will come on to that in a moment, if I may. In many respects, the site for the King’s Troop Royal Horse Artillery at Woolwich is sub-optimal, because it is away from central London, where the Royal Horse Artillery historically used to be. We are looking, in another project, at how we might be able to relocate the site closer to central London, where the Royal Horse Artillery perform their ceremonial duties. Woolwich is not an ideal site for them; they moved there out of need, because of a lack of equine space elsewhere in central London. I will come back to that in a moment.

Woolwich dates back to the 18th century. The site has a proud heritage, but one that comes with a high price. The grade II-listed barracks were built 240 years ago, and they require care and attention far beyond anything that modern, purpose-built barracks would need. Of more importance is the fact that the technical accommodation on the site—meaning things such as offices, garages and stores—will require extensive investment in the not-too-distant future, and they are not set to support the armed forces going forward. Although the single living accommodation was modernised back in 2010 to ensure a good standard of living for our personnel, by the time we complete the disposal of Woolwich, we will have had 18 years of return from that investment and it will not be too long before further updating is required.

Finally, we must take into account the wider potential of the site itself. It is a key site in a popular London borough, which, with the introduction of Crossrail in 2019, will be a prime location for the construction of new homes for the capital’s workers. That is not the principal driver of the plan, however.

Taking all that into account, would it really be the best use of the defence budget and of taxpayers’ cash to retain the site? Would pumping money into facilities that are constrained by their age and location really offer us value for money? Would it be right to continue investing in a site that is sub-optimal because of the constraints on it? Would it be right to hang on to such a high-worth site when the money raised by its sale would otherwise be reinvested back into the defence estate where it is most needed?

Having examined the facts objectively and in great detail, the conclusion we have come to is: no, it is not right to hang on to the barracks. Having explained how we have come to that conclusion, let me turn to what will happen next. First, let me deal with the question of those living and working at Woolwich barracks. There are currently 1,054 military and 97 civilian staff permanently employed at the site. I recognise that our intention to close the site is unsettling for all those people and for their families. Let me reassure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich that we will do all we can to provide them with the necessary certainty about their future locations as soon as is practicable.

For operational reasons, I cannot go into detail on the re-provision of the Kings Troop Royal Horse Artillery any further than I already have following the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). The re-provision for the other units on site, including the 1st Battalion the Royal Anglians, is yet to be determined. What I can say is that all military personnel, regular or reserve, will be relocated with their unit or re-assigned in accordance with existing career management procedures. Civilian staff will be managed in accordance with normal departmental policy and processes. Formal trade union consultation will occur well in advance of any closure, and where possible we will look at other locations where those staff can be employed. There are also a number of third-party users of the site, and we want to give them the opportunity to find alternative locations with plenty of time.

Secondly, let me deal with the future of the site. My Department has begun the process of assessing the Woolwich site for sale. The findings of that work will better inform the disposal process and ensure that the revenue situation becomes clearer. The MOD, like all Departments, follows a set process for disposing of any site. Once declared surplus to defence requirements, the site is placed on a register of surplus public sector land, which is a database managed by the Cabinet Office that provides an opportunity for other public bodies to express an interest in acquiring such sites before they are placed on the open market.

Subject to planning permission, land at Woolwich might accommodate 3,000 housing units in support of any future Government house building targets, but any decision to use the land in this way would of course need consultation with the local authority, which would seek the views of local residents as part of that process. The local authority would also have to approve planning permission for appropriate housing for the location. The MOD will continue to liaise with the local council and planning authorities to ensure the best possible future use for the site, and the local community will be kept fully informed of all developments.

That leads me to my final point—it goes to the very heart of this debate—which is the impact of this closure on the local community. As I said at the start, the Department is ever mindful of the emotive nature of estate rationalisation—all the more so when the links between the community and the armed forces are as steeped in history as they are in Woolwich. After all, heritage and tradition are things by which the armed forces set great store. This year marks the tercentenary of the Royal Regiment of Artillery—and, indeed, of my own corps, the Corps of Royal Engineers—which was raised in Woolwich in 1716. To this day, Woolwich station remains a thriving and integral part of life in the borough. I witnessed that myself when I attended Armed Forces Day there earlier this year and saw the local people’s great support for the barracks.
The units based at the station enjoy living and working there. Likewise, I know the local community holds these units in great esteem, as the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich said. We in the Ministry of Defence are truly grateful for the steadfast support we have received from the people of Woolwich over the centuries, and I appreciate wholeheartedly their concerns and those of the hon. Gentleman, who I must say has conveyed their concerns and expressed their wishes very eloquently in the Chamber this evening. However, modern armed forces must continually evolve and move with the times, and we must ensure our people have an estate that supports them and provides the working and living environment they rightly expect.

I urge the hon. Gentleman to see our decision to sell the Woolwich site for what it is—a well calculated judgment that forms part of a wide-ranging, painstakingly considered and carefully constructed plan. It is a plan to secure the future of our armed forces and the safety and prosperity of our nation for many decades to come, and a plan that benefits the Woolwich community by giving the borough an opportunity to use this great site in a new way. Having said that, as the hon. Gentleman has been so courteous in making the simple request that I look again at the detail of the decision, I make a commitment to do so once we return in the new year.

Winston Churchill, who can always be relied on for an apt quote, once said:

“If we open a quarrel between past and present, we shall find that we have lost the future.”

We stand at such a juncture now, so hard as it may be—and despite the commitment I have just made—it is our collective duty to look upwards, outwards and forwards and to work together for a better defence estate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.23 pm

*House adjourned.*
Westminster Hall  
	Tuesday 6 December 2016

Household Food Insecurity

9.30 am

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered household food insecurity measurement in the UK.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. Back in 2014, I said in this House:

“People are going hungry, and, with each passing day of this terrible excuse for a Government, more and more are falling into poverty, with little or no chance of escape. There are no second chances in Britain today. Food poverty is a clear consequence of the Government’s ideological assault on the social safety net and the people who rely on it. One hungry person is a complete disgrace, but thousands of hungry people are a national disaster.”—[Official Report, 12 December 2014; Vol. 589, c. 1500.]

That was one of many speeches I have made in this House about hunger and food poverty, and I have to say that I am getting increasingly fed up with the Government’s inaction. It is estimated that 8.4 million people in Britain now live in households affected by food insecurity, which means that millions of people in Britain—one of the wealthiest countries in the world—are hungry and malnourished.

The Government need to measure and to begin to tackle household food insecurity. Such action is long overdue. Food-insecure households lack reliable access to a sufficient quantity of food, yet there has been no national measurement of household food insecurity in the UK for more than 10 years.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. She started off by giving the Government a very hard time. I am not a spokesman for the Conservatives but, in 1996—20 years ago—the United Nations decided that it would eradicate food insecurity. What has it done since then?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Unfortunately, I am not here to speak on behalf of the United Nations, but all the statistics show that the situation has got worse in the United Kingdom since 2010. Prior to that, we had the odd soup kitchen, and food banks were unheard of. Now, we can hear people in every street in every constituency talking about food banks and people who are going hungry.

Food insecurity has a terrible impact on households. Parents are unable to afford to feed their children nutritionally balanced meals, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) said, which breeds a sense of shame, stress, anxiety and social isolation. Severely food-insecure adults and children go whole days without eating in this day and age, simply because they lack money. People are living on the bread line—in fact, many are living below it. Recent research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that people are going from just being hungry—as if that was not bad enough—to living in destitution. They lack clothing, toiletries and heating, and for many homelessness is becoming a reality.

Recently, a woman called my constituency office in desperate need of help after having problems with her benefits. She had no money for gas or electricity, and no food to feed herself and her four young children, all of whom are under 10 years of age. She was alone and unable to leave her home to get to the nearest food bank, which in any case was closed. Even if she had been able to leave her home, she did not have the necessary funds for public transport. In the end, my staff contacted one of the many food bank volunteers in Shields and managed to get food delivered to her and her children. If they had not been able to pick up and deliver that food, that family would have endured the further pain of starvation.

That is one of the everyday experiences that are being documented in food banks, GP offices, classrooms and charities across the country. I am sure that all my colleagues hear similar stories day in and day out from their constituents. When the all-party group on hunger, of which I am a member, travelled the country in 2014, families struggle in the run-up to Christmas and during school holidays because their children do not go to breakfast clubs or receive free school meals. If there is no additional support from the Government, the issue of holiday hunger will become more prevalent. Parents have to find the money for an additional 10 meals per week per child to ensure that their children are not malnourished.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: My hon. Friend is correct: holiday hunger is a scourge on this country. In a former life, I was a child protection social worker, and families used to say to me that school time was the only time their children could be guaranteed a healthy meal. They dreaded holidays. My colleagues and I often had to do shops for those families to feed them.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. She started off by giving the Government a very hard time. I am not a spokesman for the Conservatives but, in 1996—20 years ago—the United Nations decided that it would eradicate food insecurity. What has it done since then?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Unfortunately, I am not here to speak on behalf of the United Nations, but all the statistics show that the situation has got worse in the United Kingdom since 2010. Prior to that, we had the odd soup kitchen, and food banks were unheard of. Now, we can hear people in every street in every constituency talking about food banks and people who are going hungry.

Food insecurity has a terrible impact on households. Parents are unable to afford to feed their children nutritionally balanced meals, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) said, which breeds a sense of shame, stress, anxiety and social isolation. Severely food-insecure adults and children go whole days without eating in this day and age, simply because they lack money. People are living on the bread line—in fact, many are living below it. Recent research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that people are going from just being hungry—as if that was not bad enough—to living in destitution. They lack clothing, toiletries and heating, and for many homelessness is becoming a reality.

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That is one of the everyday experiences that are being documented in food banks, GP offices, classrooms and charities across the country. I am sure that all my colleagues hear similar stories day in and day out from their constituents. When the all-party group on hunger, of which I am a member, travelled the country in 2014,
we found that the overriding reason why people visited food banks was the Government’s punitive welfare regime and incessant use of sanctions. The recent debacle with Concentrix shows that the Government’s response to those who are most in need has not changed: they are simply not bothered about them.

All those personal tragedies point to a permanent scarring of life chances. Demonstrable links can be found between food insecurity and educational performance. Children’s intellectual and physical development is damaged by each episode of food insecurity that they experience. The physical and mental health impacts of food insecurity affect the entire economy. Evidence from Canada suggests that the healthcare costs of people who have experienced episodes of severe food insecurity are 121% higher. For those reasons, there is growing consensus among not only Members of Parliament but academics and civil society organisations that the Government should initiate a programme of regular and robust monitoring of food insecurity prevalence so that we can establish precisely the magnitude of the problem, identify which groups are at the greatest risk and properly target resources at prevention.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. This is a very important issue. She is right to say that the Government have a responsibility to count the numbers so we can have a strategic response. In the meantime, we have to recognise the wonderful work that food banks do—she mentioned her own, and Slough food bank is brilliant—to plug the gap. Civil society is doing its best; it is time for the Government to step up, too.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I could not agree more.

Ruth Smeeth: An extraordinary feature of the debate is that other countries, which we consider allies, already view this as a state responsibility. In the United States, for example, to tackle holiday hunger, there is a federal programme, which has been federally funded—there has been no research—for more than 50 years. That is part of the country’s normal engagement. Feeding one’s citizens is definitely regarded as a Government responsibility. Does my hon. Friend agree that our Government need to open their eyes and look at things in the round, because not only people on benefits, but the working poor are struggling to feed their families?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I agree. The very least that any Government can do is to ensure that people in their country are fed and cared for when other parts of the state have let them down.

Our best estimates suggest that 500,000 different people received food assistance from the Trussell Trust, the UK’s largest network of emergency food aid providers, in 2014-15. However, many, indeed most food-insecure people choose not to access emergency food aid, and not all food banks are Trussell Trust ones. New preliminary data from Gallup World Poll suggest that 8.4 million people—17 times the number accessing Trussell Trust aid—lived in food-insecure households in 2014. Those data were gathered through the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation food insecurity experience scale, which is an internationally validated tool for measurement of household food insecurity. It showed that we ranked in the bottom half of European countries for protecting our population from food insecurity and hunger.

Unfortunately, the survey through which those data were collected had a national sample of only 1,600 households and did not collect detailed information on respondents’ characteristics. We therefore do not know who is worst affected. What is more, the FAO does not intend to fund that survey beyond 2016. Instead, it will encourage states to produce national measures in their own routine national surveys. That includes us. If we did so, we would be able to track our progress on implementing the global sustainable development goals—to which the UK has said it is committed—intended to end hunger and ensure universal access to safe, nutritious food by 2030.

On 29 November, the Office for National Statistics was due to launch a consultation to establish what metrics should be incorporated into national statistics to track our progress on the goals. The consultation has now been delayed indefinitely. We should, however, move forward swiftly and decisively with such vital monitoring. It would put us in step with other nations, such as the USA and Canada, which regularly monitor prevalence rates, with the data collected playing a game-changing role in creating effective prevention strategies.

Ruth Smeeth: We heard an extraordinary story about food poverty in the run-up to this year’s Olympics in Brazil, which has made access to food a human right and, therefore, has provided access to food not only for children and the most vulnerable, but for everyone—from the poorest to the wealthiest. It has done so from an economic position that is nowhere near as positive as our own.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Our country is lagging behind. Our response to the crisis is embarrassing, and things have never been more pressing. Only last week we heard that the number of hospital beds in England alone taken up by patients being treated for malnutrition almost trebled over 10 years. Malnutrition is a complex condition, but food insecurity adds a significant risk. The prevalence of both may well increase if left unchecked in the coming years.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. The experience of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Autism Act 2009, for example, is that the core initiative is to ensure an obligation on the state, or parts of the state, to know the numbers and to identify the needs. Essentially, that is what she is calling for in this debate. That has to happen not only at a UK level, but at regional and local level because, in relation to holiday hunger, school holidays vary in length in different parts of the UK.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Later in my speech I will outline to the Minister how easy it is to introduce such a measure and how little it would cost.

The drop in the value of sterling as a result of Brexit uncertainties means that food prices will start to rise—by between 5% and 8% in the coming year, according to the Food and Drink Federation—and that will place even further pressure on households struggling to put
food on the table. On average, healthier food costs two and a half times as much as food high in fat, salt and sugar, and people who experience food insecurity often cut back first on healthy, perishable and more expensive fruit and vegetables.

Proposals for measurement have received a considerable amount of support in the UK. In January 2015, my colleagues and I on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee recommended that the Government should conduct a robustly designed and tested data on the scale of household food insecurity. The APPG on hunger has recommended measuring and monitoring food insecurity. The Administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are starting work on the development of metrics for each of the devolved nations. A UK-wide picture of the nature of food insecurity, however, could not be formed without applying a standard measurement tool in all four nations.

Securing a commitment to measurement from the Government has, however, proved immensely difficult. That is despite the interventions of the APPG and of the EFRA Committee, debates and questions in the House, and the work of organisations such as the Food Foundation, Sustain and Oxfam, which have consistently brought the data gap to the attention of officials in a variety of Departments.

The data gap could easily be closed through inserting a short list of questions into an existing annual survey instrument, such as the living costs and food survey or the national health surveys. The marginal cost is estimated to be between £50,000 and £75,000 per year. Surely it is worth the Government investing that small sum to address one of the biggest scandals of our time.

The UN food insecurity experience scale, and the United States Department of Agriculture’s household food insecurity module from which it was adapted, have been rigorously designed and tested to measure the inability of households to access food. One of those tools could be inserted seamlessly into a UK research programme. Each of the international scales involves asking respondents a series of questions about their ability to access sufficient quality and quantity of food over the preceding 12 months.

I therefore urge this House to move towards annual measurement of food insecurity using an internationally recognised survey tool, beginning in 2017. The Government cannot continue to bury their heads in the sand when this is one of the biggest scandals of the past six years. They should be ashamed that hunger has grown on the back of a record high in food. One of those occasions when they fall on difficult times, has been stripped away. The gap is being filled by a range of charities and faith groups, and it should embarrass and shame the Minister and all his colleagues that they have sat back and allowed others to deal with this heart-breaking disaster of, at times, their very own creation.

Is that not the crux of the matter? In truth, the longer the Government refuse to measure the problem, the longer they do not have to acknowledge the scale of it and the longer they do not have to do anything about it. That is a huge dereliction of duty. They are more than happy to allow charities and the likes of the Trussell Trust to do their job for them, which is to care for children, families and vulnerable individuals who are not able to meet the most basic human requirement to feed themselves. It is telling that, when the Trussell Trust first published its shocking statistics about the scale of the problem, some on the Government Benches denounced those figures as distorted, rather than focusing on the shocking fact that food banks exist on such a scale at all.

As I speak, in my constituency, there will be a mother wondering how she is going to feed herself and her toddler today, schoolchildren struggling to focus because their stomachs are rumbling, parents who yet again skipped breakfast to ensure that their children did not have to, families searching their cupboards for what is left and elderly people who are unable to access fresh food. But that is not just the case in my constituency; it is the situation in constituencies and homes across the UK. It really is time that this Government got a grip on this problem. They must start by collating the data that they need to address it. As I have outlined, implementing measurement is not an insurmountable or costly challenge, and this Government owe it to every man, woman and child who woke up hungry this morning and will go to bed hungry tonight, in one of the richest countries in the world, to do so.

9.51 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I commend the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) for setting the scene so well and giving us so much detail about this issue, which we all have an interest in and wish to speak about. It is always nice to see the shadow Minister in her place. I know that the Minister will touch on the issues that we raise, because he is a man of compassion and understands them only too well.

I was speaking to my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) before the debate started, and I cast my mind back to the situation when I was younger—that was not yesterday—and the things that our families had at that time. I was extremely blessed as a child to have parents who worked night and day to put food on the table. We may not have had the choicest cuts of meat, and we may have had lunches that were eggs in a cup and that was it, or dinners of potatoes and veg with no meat, but there was always filling food on the table. Those memories of my early days are particular to me but probably resonate with many others in the Chamber. My biggest insecurity about food was whether my two brothers would steal half a sausage from my plate. That was a fact of life—we challenged one another for what we had. We may not have had much to spare, but we had enough, and that is all anyone needs. We had a lovely upbringing, but we were by no means wealthy. It breaks my heart to think that there are children in the UK—in my community and in the communities of everyone in the Chamber today—who are living hand to mouth. The hon. Member for South Shields set that scene very well, and it resonates directly with us all. I hate to think of mothers taking less on their plates to ensure that there is enough on their children’s plates. That should surely be the stuff of second world war TV
dramas such as “Home Fires” as opposed to what is happening in the UK today, but there are indicators that it is not a thing of the past. Indeed, recent analysis by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, which my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann referred to, suggests that 8.4 million people in the UK live in food-insecure households. What does that mean? The UN said that it would eradicate food poverty and insecurity by a certain time, but it did not. Words are hollow if they do not lead to actions that ensure change. Notes from a recent meeting in this place say that to be food insecure means to be “unable to secure enough food of sufficient quality and quantity to stay healthy and participate fully in society.”

I welcome the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee’s inquiry into waste, which the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) and my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann, who are members of that Committee, referred to and another member of that Committee told me about at a function last night. How do we address food waste in homes, businesses and supermarkets? In Strangford—I believe that this is happening in other constituencies too, but hon. Members will confirm whether that is the case—supermarkets have deals with community groups about food that is coming close to being out of date. For instance, Tesco and Asda in Newtownards phone community groups on a Friday or Saturday and say, “This food is going out of date. Can you make use of it?” Those groups can, and they take it directly to the people who need it.

Ms Ritchie: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that labelling—sell-by dates and use-by dates—is not only confusing but an imprecise science? That needs to be reviewed as part of the wider debate about food waste reduction.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I hope that the Committee’s inquiry will address labelling, which we also talked about last night. We often have products that are near their sell-by dates, and my wife is very strict about them, but I am perhaps not so strict. I feel that the sell-by date may not necessarily mean that the product is not edible, and I therefore challenge myself to eat it. Whether that is right or wrong, it has not affected me in any way. It is not the reason why my hair fell out, and it is not the reason for many other things.

David Simpson: Mr Gapes, I may have the same problem with my hair falling out.

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Let’s not go there.

David Simpson (in the Chair): I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that there needs to be some process whereby when supermarkets reject certain foods, such as vegetables, because they are not the right shape, size or whatever, they are put on the shelves at a reduced price rather than put into anaerobic digesters. I know that some supermarkets are doing that, but more could be done.

Jim Shannon: The knowledge that my hon. Friend brings to this debate is enormous. He has been in business for many years and he knows the system. Again, those words could be used in the inquiry, which he will be directly involved in as a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Supermarket chains are taking steps to enable products that are close to their sell-by dates to be given to community groups and directed to those in need. That is a great idea, which I welcome and I hope is carried out further afield. In the home, we need to be a wee bit more careful about the food we use, how we use it—from freezer to fridge—and its shelf life. Those are all important issues for us to look at. However, there is currently no routine measurement of food insecurity in the United Kingdom, and an absence of regular data collection means that the true magnitude of the problem remains hidden. Perhaps the Minister could give us some idea of how data are gathered, collated and then used to address this issue.

The hon. Member for South Shields referred to food banks. I do a lot of work with my local food bank. When I first began that interaction, I was shocked by the level of need in my constituency and the range of people who were struggling. The first Trussell Trust food bank in Northern Ireland was in my constituency, so I have particular knowledge of food banks. I do not see them as necessarily negative; they have positive effects, in that they bring people, churches and Government bodies together with one focus: to help those who need help now. Food banks have a positive role to play in our society. I always think of the Simon slogan, “One in three of us are just one pay cheque away from homelessness.” The issue is real for a great many of us: there but for the grace of God would any of us be too. It is not enough simply to be thankful that we are not in that scenario. It is up to us to ensure that families in the United Kingdom are safe and secure in knowing where their next week’s food will come from.

Just last Saturday morning, I had the privilege of helping out in Tesco with the food bank team, who handed out lists to people to let them know what many people will need over the Christmas period. I was not surprised by the level of giving, as I know the compassion of the people in my constituency is hard to equal—as indeed is that of many others. I was encouraged by the inherent goodness of the women who rushed around with their children tagging along behind them and still took the time to grab handfuls of items for the food bank. They asked what items the team wanted and put them in their trolleys. There were also men who put items in their trolleys and gave financial contributions. I was also most encouraged by the number of young people who did their best to help out. Children said, “Mum, we need to help—what can we do?”

It is wonderful that the community steps in, and I cannot speak highly enough of the food bank, the Trussell Trust and, in my area, the Thriving Life church, which was behind that initiative, and which has a wonderful compassion centre designed to help others out. The churches across the whole of my constituency, and in Ards in particular, came together to stand in the breach in the truest and best ecumenical sense. We in this place as well have an obligation to assess the need and meet it.

Through the food bank, I have had the ability to give vouchers to people I am helping who have had their benefits stopped. We know clearly what the issues are, and I am reliably informed that the advice centre in Newtownards is one of the first stops for a great many
people whenever they are looking for vouchers to help them because they have literally no money. With the recent tax credits palaver, I have even had staff members—I am blessed with good staff—put their own money on to electricity cards to see people through the weekend. That is my staff, other staff, churches—good people coming together to do their best. However, that should not have to happen. We have a responsibility to ensure that help is at hand for those whose benefits are called into question instead of them being left with nothing to feed their children with. Our churches and people come together in the very best sense.

In my own area of Newtownards, the food bank provided 2,230 three-day emergency crisis food parcels last year. That was in one town. We have many food bank outreaches in Comber, Kircubbin, Ballynahinch and Saintfield, and churches and individual bodies are stepping outside what they normally do to help directly. I see a community full of compassion that is moved to help those who are less well off. That has got to be great news.

Especially at this time of year, as we approach Christmas, many families will again be on the breadline. Some of the major companies in my area will make contributions—I have a local butcher who gives turkeys. We do our best to come together through the Trussell Trust food bank and the Thriving Life church in Newtownards. In 2015–16, the Trussell Trust food bank network provided—these are incredible figures—1,109,309 three-day emergency food supplies and support to UK people in crisis. Those enormous figures give us an idea of the magnitude of what it does. Of those, more than 400,000 went to children. Again, I underline the clear need of children in poverty. We are here today to make a plea for those people.

There is food insecurity in the UK—that much is clear. What we are doing to address it is not so clear. I look to the Minister, who I am confident will give us the answers we need, to outline the steps that will be urgently taken to ensure that we fulfil our obligations and responsibilities not only to our constituents but to all constituents across this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

10.3 am

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) particularly on her perseverance in securing the debate, which she has sought for more than six months. It is unfortunate that she is not too well today, but no one can say that she has not made an excellent case. We need to thank her for all the work she has done herself and as part of the APPG on hunger, which has also done a lot of work. If the Government had accepted some of the recommendations of the APPG’s detailed report, “Feeding Britain”, produced under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), there may have been a little less need for the debate. There were 72 recommendations in that report and now, two years on, it is perhaps an indictment of the Government that none of those recommendations has been heeded.

In raising this issue today, my hon. Friend has made the case for the Government to start measuring food insecurity across the whole of the UK. Her request was eloquently illustrated and reinforced in interventions from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), my right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and for Upper Bann (David Simpson) and in the speech by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who pointed out how, in the face of adversity, communities have come together and worked with groups such as the Trussell Trust to help people, showing that, when the worst things happen to fellow human beings across the UK, it brings out the best in others.

I am glad to hear that the EFRA Committee is looking at food waste. Only last night, we had FareShare in Westminster. It is making a huge contribution by using 10,000 tonnes of the 270,000 tonnes a year of food waste and producing 65 million meals. That is wonderful, but, again, so much more could be done.

We need look only at Hansard to see that hunger and food insecurity have been raised time and again with various Departments. We also know that, in response to questions, Ministers have, time and again, found an excuse not to introduce any kind of measurement. The fact remains, as has already been said, that food insecurity has not been measured in this country since 2003. It is totally unacceptable that, in the UK—I will say this again; it has been said twice before—more than 8 million people lived in households reporting having insufficient food. That was back in 2014, and we know that that number must now be far larger. The statistics are nothing but shocking, and it is totally unacceptable that here, in the sixth largest economy in the world, in the 21st century, so many people are going hungry and, perhaps we should say, are starving.

I congratulate all the organisations that have been mentioned that are working hard to combat the effects of food insecurity. I agree with the Food Foundation that the Government must conduct research to find out more about why certain groups are affected and how food insecurity affects food choices and people’s health so that they can put in place policies that can start to tackle the problem laid out by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields. As we have heard, the devolved Administrations are taking steps individually to measure food inequality, but each is using a different method. What is really needed is a standard measure for food insecurity across the whole of our nation.

It is nearly two years since the EFRA Committee, in its report, recommended that the Government “collect objective and statistically robust data on the scale of household food insecurity”. The coalition Government responded by saying that the issue was complex, and they did not agree that the living costs and food survey was suitable for collecting data on food insecurity.

As has been said, we know the use of food banks has ballooned to more than 1 million in the past year, but we cannot use the figures collected by the Trussell Trust on the use of food banks because they are not regarded as an appropriate measure. Recent data from Gallup World Poll indicated that, in 2014, 17 times more people lived in food insecure households than used a food bank.

The Government are signed up to the United Nations sustainable development goals, the second of which is:

“End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.”
Does the Minister agree that it is time for the Government to be proactive, and not only to contribute to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation but to listen to the advice of the University of Oxford, the Food Foundation and Sustain, which all suggest, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields has said, that standard questions on food insecurity, as used in the UN FAO food insecurity experience scale, should be added to existing UK surveys such as the one suggested by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee two years ago?

It has already been pointed out that the cost of adding those pertinent questions, which so far have been tried out only in a survey of 1,000 people, would be £50,000 to £75,000 a year. They would provide accurate nationwide data about how severe the problem of food insecurity is. The scale is used in other countries and has proved successful. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North has said, if Brazil can do it, so can we. The consultation by the ONS on how to track the sustainable development goals, which was due to be launched at the end of November, has been put back indefinitely. What can the Minister do to bring it forward and to ensure that the consultation begins?

With the reduction in sterling since the referendum on the EU, the prices of products that we import from Europe such as fresh fruit, which is a basic and important ingredient of a healthy diet, will increase. I must reiterate that supermarket prices will increase by at least 5%. Can something be done to stop more pressure being put on the food purchasing power of those who are deemed to be just about managing, and those who are deemed not to be managing adequately, so that food insecurity will be made less, not more, likely for them?

We have already noted that people in food insecurity have poor health, and the NHS is at breaking point, unable to take the added strain that is put on it when people’s health is at risk simply because they are malnourished. How can we allow the blighting of the future of young people who go to school hungry and, because they are not fed, cannot learn properly? The only answer to those questions is that the Government must commit to the adoption of a routine method of measuring food insecurity in the UK, so that policy and resources can be targeted and we can reach the point at which no one in this country goes hungry.

10.13 am

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) on securing the debate. I know that as she outlined in her speech, she has been engaged with the issue for several years. Although I disagree with some of her analysis, we can all agree that the food banks in all our constituencies do fantastic work. I want to pay tribute in particular to the one in my constituency of Camborne and Redruth, which is run by a wonderful volunteer called Don Gardner and supported by many local churches. I have visited it regularly over the past few years. When I visited it a few weeks ago it had support from many local Citizen Service volunteers, who were giving some of their time as part of their project. Last year, because the charity is so valued, it was nominated by students at the local Camborne Science and International Academy as their charity of the year. I shall visit again in a few weeks as part of the preparations for Christmas, and I am sure that many hon. Members will be doing the same in their constituencies.

The food bank movement has grown in recent years, there is no doubt about that. However, we must recognise that there has always been charitable support and food aid on offer in this country, whether from the Salvation Army or other projects. Food banks were developed first in the United States, and the concept caught on in countries such as France and Germany. More recently, predominantly with the leadership of church groups, they have grown in the UK as well. We should recognise their value and contribution to civil society. Many food banks, including the one in my constituency, are beginning to move on from offering just crisis aid and food support to helping people with other problems—with housing, getting a job, or other problems and issues in their lives that contribute to their need to rely on food banks. Indeed, in my constituency other agencies are brought on board, to come to the food bank. My constituency caseworker will go to the Camborne food bank this afternoon. We have an agreement that our caseworker will attend once a month, or more often if there is a need, to help people to resolve other issues in their life, such as housing and benefits. The Government have also made it clear that job coaches from local jobcentres can go to food banks to help to support people in getting a job.

I want to talk about aspects of the analysis that the hon. Member for South Shields gave with which I disagree slightly, beginning with food prices, which I think are the nub of the debate. Food prices, and commodity prices generally, are predominantly governed by changes in weather events, energy prices and exchange rates. The truth is that the biggest spike in food prices in recent times took place in 2008, during the financial crisis. Prices continued to rise gradually until the beginning of 2014, but they have been falling ever since, for almost three years now. In fact, food prices are now down by more than 7% since that peak at the beginning of 2014. I accept that with sterling depreciating against the euro and other currencies recently, and because currencies and exchange rates are a major driver of food prices, that may change, but it is important to acknowledge how things have changed in the past three years, with food prices going down substantially.

The long-standing measure of household food security that we have is the annual living costs and food survey. We look in particular at the percentage of household income spent on food by the poorest 20% of families. The reality of that consistent measure of household food security and affordability, which we have had for many years, is that it has been remarkably stable in the past decade at about 16% to 16.5%. Indeed, at one point last year I think the percentage spent by that lowest-income 20% of households was lower than it was in 2008-09. So there is clear evidence that there is some stability, if we look specifically at household spending.

Mary Glindon: Is it true that people suffering food insecurity do not buy the best food that they could—the food they need to have a nutritious meal? Do they not often buy food that is calorie-laden, cheap and filling, as opposed to good-quality, nutritious food?
George Eustice: Given that food prices go up and down but household expenditure on food seems to remain remarkably consistent, it suggests, as the hon. Lady points out, that people change their choices and preferences. The hon. Member for South Shields made the point that people abandon fruit and veg because they regard it as too expensive. In my view, veg is actually relatively cheap at a supermarket or any other market. It tends to be other things—ready meals and meats, in particular—that are more expensive and add to the cost of food. Fruit and veg, which are the healthiest option of all, are still relatively cheap.

Mary Glindon: One of the reasons for that given by people who are in food insecurity is the relatively short life of some fruit and veg. Fruit and veg is perhaps beyond the tight budgets of those who cannot afford to buy fresh food every day.

George Eustice: I buy fresh fruit and veg, as I am sure do many other Members. Somebody made a point earlier about sell-by dates. The truth is that veg will actually last quite a long time if it is refrigerated, in my view. Of course, there is also frozen fruit and veg, which is also relatively cheap.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is being most generous to all of us in giving way. I am sure he recognises the importance of home economics classes for children at every level of school, including primary and, particularly, secondary schools. Those classes are and should be very much part of pupils’ lives. They give them the opportunity to produce a meal at a reasonable price, and it is good for a child or young person to do that and take that meal home. Does the Minister value home economics education in schools and how it teaches people to prepare meals in later life, as I do?

George Eustice: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. He will be aware that the Department for Education launched the school food plan two or three years ago. Hardwired into that, as well as giving schools quite specific criteria about the type of healthy and nutritious food they should have as part of their school meals, was the idea that all schoolchildren should visit a farm, so that they can see how their food is produced and understand the connection with that food production. There was also the idea that primary school children should be taught to prepare a basic food dish, so that they get used to managing and handling food. That means that they know where their food comes from and how to handle it. I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman that that is an important point.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has recently consulted on all of its statistical surveys. For each Office for National Statistics survey, including the living costs and food survey, there is a steering group that also includes representation from the devolved Administrations.

As we all know, the best route out of poverty is to have a job or to find employment. It is important to note that employment is now at a record high, at more than 74.5%, and that the number of people in work has actually gone up by 461,000 this year, to record levels. I recognise that in many constituencies, including my own, the issue is not so much worklessness as low pay. That is why the Government are increasing the national living wage to £7.50 from April 2017—and we have made clear that we intend to increase it further. We need to tackle low income, and we have outlined our plans to do so.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Government actually check and enforce that the national living wage is being paid? Their record on that is woeful; a lot of places do not pay the national living wage and the Government are just not interested.

George Eustice: It is not a DEFRA role to enforce that particular area, but I am sure that the Low Pay Commission and other parts of Government will look seriously at the points the hon. Lady raises. Lady raises. Payment of the national living wage is a legal requirement, and it is enforced.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is generous of the Minister to give way. Does he accept that under-25s are not entitled to the higher rate of the minimum wage and are not going to get any kind of discount when they go to the shops for their messages? The Government should make sure that the living wage is a real living wage, as set by the Living Wage Foundation, and is accessible to people of all ages. Everyone needs access to food that they can afford.

George Eustice: The hon. Lady points out that the national living wage applies to those over the age of 25, but the national minimum wage applies to people of all ages, including those under 25.

Alison Thewliss: Not the higher rate.

George Eustice: The hon. Lady is right that it is not that at the same rate as the national living wage, but we have made great progress in recent years in tackling youth unemployment and helping people to get their first job in life. I actually think there is a distinction between those over the age of 25, who have been in work for some time, and those who may be trying their first job.

Not everybody is in work, and it is often said that late benefit payments or sanctions are a contributing factor in increased food bank use. It is worth noting that even the Trussell Trust’s report suggested that, based on its assessments, sanctions accounted for about 5% to 10% of the increased use of food banks. They do not account for all of it on their own.

When it comes to late payments, 90% of jobseeker’s allowance claims are now paid on time and within the 10-day limit, while nearly 89% of employment and support allowance claims are also paid within that timeframe, which is considerably better than in 2009-10. Indeed, the timeliness of payments has improved by about 23%. The Government have also responded to concerns over occasions when people have their payments delayed by introducing short-term benefit advances. Those are now being quite actively publicised in jobcentres, and they can be paid to people the very next day.

It is important to note that the use of sanctions has fallen sharply. Indeed, they are down by half for both ESA and JSA claimants in the year to March 2016. The Government have introduced the concept of mandatory
considerations on sanctions so that we can deal with disputes more quickly. The truth is that we need some kind of sanctions in the benefit system for it to be fair and equitable. Staff at my local jobcentre are clear that they use sanctions as only a last resort. Even when they believe sanctions are justified, they have to be cleared by somebody up the line completely unconnected to the case in question. Often, the recommendation that there should be a sanction is not upheld. Huge progress has been made on sanctions. We have responded to some of the points that people have made, and, as I said, their use has halved in recent years.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I am listening carefully to what the Minister is saying about sanctions. The head of the National Audit Office recently said that “there is more to do in...reducing them further”.

Does the Minister disagree?

George Eustice: I have not seen that particular report, but I make the point to the hon. Lady that the number of sanctions halving in one year is, I believe, a dramatic change to what has gone previously. As I said, I believe that having some sort of sanctions is crucial if we are to have a fair benefits system. We cannot have a fair system if there is no kind of penalty or sanctions for those who do not abide by their obligation to seek work.

A number of hon. Members mentioned food waste, which is an important issue. There is always going to be some surplus food in any food chain. We have the Waste and Resources Action Programme and the Courtauld commitments, which aim to reduce food waste. WRAP’s research from 2015 showed that 47,000 tonnes of food—the equivalent of 90 million meals—was redistributed to help feed people. In the hierarchy of recycling, making sure that food does not go to waste in the first place, and is used to feed people, is our key aim. I commend and applaud the great work that organisations such as FareShare and FoodCycle do to help unwanted food from places such as supermarkets go towards helping local communities.

We have had an interesting debate, and again I commend the food banks in our constituencies for all their good work. We have a lot of statistical measures of poverty, and when it comes to the affordability of food, the long-standing metric of household expenditure on food is the most reliable and consistent indicator we have. I am therefore not persuaded at the moment that we need an additional set of questions along the lines that hon. Members have outlined. I take issue with those who say that we have ignored some of these issues. Indeed, huge progress has been made on sanctions, getting people into work, raising wage levels and ensuring that good food is recycled to those who need it.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. It is always good to hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), who spoke from the Front Bench today.

It is no surprise that the Minister disagrees with my analysis, but would it not have made a nice, refreshing change if he and his Government had held their hands up and admitted that their experiment with the welfare state has left an enduring and growing scar on this country? Food banks moving on to helping people with housing and all the other issues that have been referred to is yet another example of agencies and charities filling a gap left by his Government. They should not be doing that work—those are the basic tenets of government.

The nub of the debate is not food prices, as the Minister said. It is the fact that his Government’s policies have led to hunger and poverty on a massive scale and that they are refusing to measure it, despite there having been no national measurement for 10 years. He referred briefly to benefit sanctions and said he was not aware of the NAO report I mentioned. To be clear, 400,000 sanctions were imposed last year, despite there being limited evidence of their being justified, leading to “hardship, hunger and depression”. I suggest he goes and reads that report carefully.

George Eustice: It may be that we should exchange notes after the debate, but in the year to March 2016, there were 219,000 JSA sanctions, which was down from 497,000 in the same period in the previous year.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The figures I am quoting are from November this year, when the report came out, so perhaps we should share notes.

It is a real shame that the Minister is out of step with everybody else on this. He is out of step with the cross-party APPG, the cross-party Select Committee, the Food Foundation, Sustain and Oxfam, which have all worked tirelessly on this issue. It is a real shame that he has not got the guts to press his Government to introduce a national measurement of household food insecurity. It would cost only up to £75,000 a year. That is considerably less than his annual salary and a little less than the salaries of most people in this House. I will not detain the House any longer, because I am getting angry, and I am upset.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered household food insecurity measurement in the UK.

10.33 am

Sitting suspended.
Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):
I beg to move.

That this House has considered smart meter rollout across the UK.

It is a pleasure to have secured this debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes.

I think—or at least I hope—that the subject of the debate this morning would not be described as a matter of political controversy; it is a matter on which there is broad agreement. Essentially, I approach the debate on the basis that the Government are doing a good thing in the smart meter roll-out and, as a parliamentarian, I think it is our duty to explore whether they are doing it as well as might be possible. In the early days, we estimated that the smart meter roll-out could save the UK economy as a whole something between £17 billion and £40 billion between now and 2050. Obviously, there are a tremendous number of variables in an estimate of that range and over that period of time; I am one of those people who thinks that the upper end of that estimate could be conservative.

Before the Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change was dissolved, I had the pleasure of serving on it. Our last report on the energy revolution looked at what is being done in other parts of the world and, in particular, on the west coast of America in California and Seattle. It is apparent that many technologies that will assist consumers in the demand-side management of their energy use are not that far over the horizon.

The foundations that we could lay through the smart meter roll-out could be built on in a significant way, both from the point of view of consumer flexibility and choice and in contributing to some of the wider issues about fuel poverty and climate change.

The Government have a target of 100% smart meter roll-out by 2020. What I want to explore this morning is whether that target is likely to be met, and whether it may be sensible at this point to reappraise the desirability of meeting that target. Given the history of the project to date, sticking to that 2020 deadline may bring some unexpected consequences.

Energy UK has told me that so far its members have installed in excess of 3 million smart meters. That is significant progress, but when it is measured against the fact that we have in the region of 27 million households, and there may be in the region of 53 million energy meters to be installed, we see the scale of the challenge that the Government now face.

My first question for the Minister, when he addresses this issue, is: what is the likelihood that we are going to get to the 100% target by 2020? At this stage, are the Government looking at the possibility of reviewing it? What conversations are they having with Ofgem and what dialogue do they have with the suppliers in the industry? From the various energy companies and consumer groups that I speak to, such as Citizens Advice and Which?, there is growing consensus that the target will not be met but that, with a determined adherence to it, we could bring a range of unintended consequences.

This is a good time to look at these things again, when there is not a great deal of political heat surrounding the subject—no pun intended. However, if we get to the point where we have to review the target in two or three years’ time, at that point, politics will come into it. I am no better than anybody else; I will be there in two or three years’ time with the Hansard of today’s debate saying, “You were told at the time that you needed to do something. Why didn’t you?”

In many areas of the country, the key to the roll-out comes down to connectivity, which has indeed been problematic for the project and the concept as a whole. This ties into other areas of Government policy encouraging connectivity, especially for the more remote and rural areas. We know the commitments that the mobile phone operators have made in terms of expanding their coverage and getting 3G and 4G coverage across the whole country. They are now looking at the Airwave infrastructure that has been put in place for the emergency services, seeing the competitive edge that has been given to EE, which is the company rolling that out, and saying, “Surely we should be allowed to use these mast as well.” This is an area where public money is being put into infrastructure for one purpose, when it could have a benefit for another purpose. Surely, given that it is all the taxpayers’ pound, someone within Government should be joining up the dots to ensure that that does happen.

The issue is the limitations of what is available through the connectivity available to our constituents. It does not meet the expectation and the promises. The danger is that something that is a thoroughly desirable proposal in concept, could be undermined by poor consumer experience.

I suspect that, if we drew a Venn diagram of areas with poor connectivity and areas where we have a high number of households living in fuel poverty, we would find a substantial overlap. That is particularly acute in my own constituency. In the Northern Isles we have poor housing stock; long, dark, cold winters, because of our geography; and an ageing demographic. The Scottish Government’s most recent figures put levels of fuel poverty at 63% of households in Orkney and 53% of households in Shetland—the Western Isles were also up there at 62%—measured against a Scottish average of 35%. In pensioner households, in Orkney the figure is 85%, for the Western Isles it is 75% and in Shetland it is 44%.

Smart metering is obviously not going to be the panacea that cures fuel poverty, but it is important as part of the suite of options available to us. It is ironic that those who stand to benefit most and have the greatest need are, again, being left behind in the roll-out process. A bit of political direction, understanding that this is not going to succeed if it is just left in the major conurbations and urban areas, and that when we say 100% across the whole of the UK, it needs to mean exactly that, would be of enormous assistance. What is being done by the Minister and his Department to ensure that those of us in what would be termed as hard-to-reach areas are not left behind?

One of the major recent challenges, which is related to the connectivity issue, has been the performance of the Data Communications Company. That is the central resource needed to support smart meters. Just before the last election, the then Secretary of State signed off a replan of the DCC timetable. That left us with an aim to deliver the first operational services from 2016, with a central planning assumption of August 2016 as opposed to the original one of December 2015. The DCC, which is managed by Capita, has since drawn down all its
available contingency and will have delivered all its final releases beyond the “maximum” agreed contingency, but we still have no confirmed date for the final release. Inevitably, given that we are now in December 2016, there will be slippage into 2017. Even if we take the optimistic view that we may have operational roll-out of DCC-enabled services by April 2017, that still leaves us with, at best, three years and eight months to deliver the remainder of the target. That is how tight things are.

The delays in the DCC have other consequences. The meters that have been rolled out are, for the most part, the first version of the smart metering equipment technical specifications—SMETS1, as the jargon has it—and a range of problems comes with that. SMETS1 has been rolled out because that is the only thing available at present, but SMETS1 was only ever intended to be a low-volume learning experience. The lessons have been learned and the limitations have been seen.

Suppliers know the issues that come from SMETS1 meters and want to go on to SMETS2 meters. It is frustrating for them not to be able to. Again, we risk damaging the concept by continuing to roll out something that we know to be suboptimal. SMETS1 meters do not have the flexibility of SMETS2 technology and, in particular, do not allow the switching of suppliers, which consumers regularly hear messages about from Government. Because of that technical issue, something in the region of 130,000 of the 3 million-plus smart meters that have been rolled out are currently operating dumb as a consequence of changing suppliers.

There have also been issues about pre-payment customers—people have lost credit and payment card functionality has been lost—and we know that there will be other technical issues. There is still no industry-wide solution for what they call multi-dwelling units—what to you and I, Mr Gapes, would be a block of flats. There is a lack of dual-band communication hubs, which use a frequency of 868 MHz and which are important for thick-walled properties and for reaching over long distances.

The challenges of the DCC timetable have led suppliers to whom I have talked to conclude that they are unlikely to meet the technical challenges until probably mid-2018. With pressure, they may be able to pull that forward but, again, it all takes us closer to the 2020 deadline and makes it all the more difficult to meet that. The insistence on the 2020 deadline will bring a range of other issues for suppliers, such as equipment and training of installers. Something that can take up to 26 weeks and cost the supplier in the region of £21,000 will become an even greater pressure on them if they are working to bring in a greater number of installers to meet that somewhat artificially imposed deadline.

Essentially, as I said at the start, the roll-out is a good thing, which the Government should be doing. We should not, however, pursue a timetable that will be counter-productive to achieving what we all know and agree is a good thing. To take a step back, I suspect that, since May 2015, there has been a lot of churn in Government energy policy, with a lot of changes, particularly in relation to subsidies for renewables and other areas. A lot of high-level political decisions have had to be taken, and the Department of Energy and Climate Change has been folded into its current home. The programme looks as though it might have slipped through the cracks of Government. It needs somebody to take it up, to give it direction and to ensure that, at the end of the day, we have something that merits and is deserving of the original vision we had when we embarked on the programme. It needs a political hero, and I can think of no finer a political hero than the Minister.

11.15 am

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I will not speak for long, so that the Minister will be able to reply to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), with whom I had the pleasure of serving on the Energy and Climate Change Committee for 18 months. I rise to endorse all that he has said. He identified a lot of issues with the smart meter roll-out, and it would be good to know that the Government are aware of them. From all my conversations with Ministers, I am confident that they see the problems and are seeking to tackle them, but the timeline that was set, which the previous Secretary of State and the previous Minister of State in DECC both told our Committee they were fully confident of achieving, does not seem quite as achievable as the Committee was told it might be.

I hope that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will embrace the importance of digitising the energy system and the role of smart meters within that. Digitising the energy system is key to delivering a decentralised generation system and to being able to load-shift, and therefore being able to flatten supply and demand curves and achieve greater energy security through less demand. It is also key to achieving greater efficiency in how we use energy, which, of course, will lead to lower prices. Smart meters in homes and businesses are the linchpin of achieving that.

However, I also absolutely agree that there has to be a user experience. A mysterious grey box of tricks that gets put in underneath somebody’s stairs, and if it does not have the connectivity that it should, so that it does not work, the perception is immediately that it does not do anything and is a bit useless. We need to ensure that smart meters work from the get-go. They also need to be accessible. The in-home displays are great, but there is an odd thing whereby people can only start with a certain screen. Many consumers have said that it would be better if the default screen showed the financial usage, so changing that would be helpful.

We need to make sure that the energy market is set up to allow smart meters to deliver real savings through half-hourly settlement. At the moment, all that people can really do is go round their house like the Ghostbusters, with their in-hand displays, seeking the thing that is using energy at any one time. The savings are not insignificant, but they are a fraction of the savings that could be unlocked if we properly digitised people’s home and business energy by putting smart meters in and ensuring that they worked and that the market was set up to take advantage of that digitisation.

The arrival of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is actually a huge opportunity within the smart meter roll-out, because under one roof there is now responsibility for not only energy policy and the energy market but consumers, tech and innovation.
Seeing all those things as part of the roll-out is helpful, instead of the Department of Energy and Climate Change potentially seeing it as an energy policy issue and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills as a consumer issue.

My final plea is that the Department seize the opportunity to make sure that smart meters are future-proofed, so that the internet of things can be operated through and around them and the home experience really works. My sense is that people will see the benefits of having a smart meter in an IoT-enabled home not purely from an energy perspective, but in terms of the wider consumer experience, and that they will be very grateful for the energy savings that come with it.

11.19 am

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing a debate on an issue that will touch and affect every home in the UK. It has drawn quite a crowd of visitors, whom we should welcome. I also welcome the new hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) to her place. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland for the constructive way in which he framed the debate, which is exactly what I would expect given his record in the House. I acknowledge the valuable contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), who, as I have said on Twitter, is one of the more thoughtful Members of Parliament on the subject of energy. He is always interesting on the topic.

As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland said, the roll-out is a good thing and a long overdue upgrade of an outdated system. I am talking about not just meters—the technology for which is basically 100 years old—but how smart meters fit into a broader and more ambitious strategy to upgrade our energy system, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wells alluded to. Liberal Democrat Secretaries of State in the coalition Government, in the right hon. Gentleman’s case, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park, were technical issues coming down the tracks. The suppliers are all telling us that the roll-out could take them into the middle of 2018. What is the Minister doing to engage with the suppliers to bring that date forward?

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned a figure of about 3 million smart and advanced meters being in operation. Actually, as of June 2016—these are slightly out-of-date data—the official number is that there are more than 4.2 million smart and advanced meters operating under the programme. Again, we now have some data from the quite large British Gas survey, which show what cost savings the roll-out is delivering for our constituents. The current run rate is about 3%, which is slightly higher than expected. We now have a sense of how popular the smart meters are, with eight out of 10 people recommending them and high levels of customer satisfaction. We have also updated the latest cost-benefit analysis.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: I completely accept what the Minister says about the signals that can be sent by taking the foot off the gas, to use his analogy, but there are technical issues coming down the tracks. The suppliers are all telling us that the roll-out could take them into the middle of 2018. What is the Minister doing to engage with the suppliers to bring that date forward?

Mr Hurd: We are not naive about this. We have set a demanding challenge, so the ongoing conversation with suppliers to talk through some of the practical differences...

There is a smarter future ahead, and that is what we are working towards. The roll-out is unequivocally a good thing, but the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland was right to identify some big challenges, none bigger than meeting the roll-out target. However, I associate him with being someone of optimism and ambition—he is a Liberal Democrat, after all—so I say to him that we should not give up on our ambition at this stage. There is no basis on which to do so. It is a challenging target but, as he will know as an experienced politician, if we take our foot off the accelerator, people will read the wrong signals. We want to send a strong signal of our commitment to ensuring that every household and small business is offered a smart meter by the end of 2020. We will follow the evidence and see what it tells us about the feasibility of the target in a few years’ time. The right hon. Gentleman may be in a position to say, “I told you so”—he has teed that up nicely—but I hope not. Now is the wrong time to send a signal of slipped ambition.

There are other challenges, including making the early smart meters interoperable. The right hon. Gentleman is entirely right about that. We should not want our constituents to trade off the opportunity to get a better tariff against the opportunity to retain smart functionality. I assure him that the DCC has begun a project to enrol the early SMETS1 1 smart meters from 2018 in order to make them usable by all energy suppliers, rather than just the one that initially installed them. It is an issue, but one that will go away.

Another challenge that the right hon. Gentleman rightly highlighted is reaching all consumers, including those at risk of being left behind. That requires both a wide area network and a home area network. The DCC is contracted to provide wide area coverage to 99.25% of meter points in Great Britain from 2020, which is, incidentally, greater than for current television and mobile services. There are big challenges, but it is wrong to slip back on our ambition, not least because we can point to good progress being made.

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Mr Alistair Carmichael: I completely accept what the Minister says about the signals that can be sent by taking the foot off the gas, to use his analogy, but there are technical issues coming down the tracks. The suppliers are all telling us that the roll-out could take them into the middle of 2018. What is the Minister doing to engage with the suppliers to bring that date forward?

Mr Hurd: We are not na"ive about this. We have set a demanding challenge, so the ongoing conversation with suppliers to talk through some of the practical differences...
is an essential, fundamental part of the Government’s responsibilities and Ofgem’s responsibilities. I am keen to mention that we have recently published the latest cost-benefit analysis of this ambitious programme, which suggests that we are looking at a significant net benefit of about £5.7 billion for the roll-out—including through supplier cost savings, system benefits and energy efficiency for our consumers. That all leads me to reassert the fundamental point that we remain committed to the programme. The right hon. Gentleman suggested that ambition might have slipped a bit and that the scheme might have been a ball dropped by a busy new Department. That is absolutely not the case. The fact that the Secretary of State recently announced an ambitious consultation about the direction of travel towards a smarter, more flexible system places the roll-out in that context. It is a top priority for the Department.

I want to give the right hon. Gentleman some reassurance about his constituency. He spoke powerfully about the levels of fuel poverty there, and the data are striking. He was candid about the fact that this agenda is not the whole solution to that challenge, but his desire to ensure that no communities are left behind in the process is laudable, and is an aim that is absolutely shared by the Government.

In response to the questions on whether remote rural areas of Scotland be excluded from the roll-out and what the planned communications coverage will be, I would like to place on the record that Arqiva is contracted to provide network coverage to at least 99.5% of Great Britain’s premises in the north region, which covers Scotland, by the end of 2020. That level of coverage compares favourably with other technologies such as mobile and broadband networks. Arqiva is on track to deliver its contractual coverage commitments, having already achieved coverage of more than 80% of premises in the region. Building the smart metering wide area network in Scotland has led to considerable progress and, subject to detailed planning, the DCC is confident that the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency will have a high level of premises coverage. There is a licence obligation on the DCC to strive—best efforts—for 100% coverage.

I hope that I have given the right hon. Gentleman some reassurance regarding his constituency and the fact that, despite some slippage in timetable—a matter of a few months, which, in the scheme of things and against the backdrop to which he alluded, is not the end of the world—the Government and the new Department attach the right level of priority and importance to the roll-out, which we sincerely believe will deliver a much better experience for our constituents in interacting with the energy systems on which they depend. The roll-out is the foundation for a much smarter energy system as we move to upgrade the energy infrastructure of the country after so many years of dithering and delay. It is absolutely at the core of that strategy.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
establish an evidence base to ensure that all decisions on tidal lagoon energy are in the UK’s best interest, to better understand whether tidal lagoons can be cost-effective and to consider the impact on consumer bills both today and in the longer term.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree—perhaps the Minister will reflect on this too—that, given that 75% of identified fossil fuels cannot be exploited if we are to fulfil our Paris and COP 22 climate change obligations, the spot price of oil, which is often deflated by Saudi excess production to attack frackers, should not be the point at which we identify value for money? We should get sustainable green power at the lowest cost possible, even if the cost of oil is down.

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman makes his point well. The purpose of the Hendry review is to help to provide clarity so that the Government can determine the role that tidal lagoons could have as part of a long-term strategy to provide secure, clean and affordable energy for families and businesses across the country. The review is now complete and will be presented to the Government this afternoon. I, and I suspect the Minister, have no idea what the review says and what it concludes, but given the strength of support for a tidal lagoon industry across such a wide spread of business and political opinion, I imagine that Mr Hendry has heard some powerful and compelling arguments that cannot be dismissed lightly.

It would be absurd to ask the Minister to address his remarks this afternoon to the contents of the review—he will rightly need time to digest and assess it—but my one request is that he commits today that a decision will be made, along with a full response to the review, in as short a timeframe as possible. Even as I say “as short a timeframe as possible,” I sense the scope that that allows for foot dragging, so I seek assurance that the Government will respond in a timely and purposeful way, with no foot dragging. This cannot become another road, with no foot dragging. This cannot become another third runway decision, where industry makes repeated calls for a Government decision only for it to be kicked further down the road. There is too much at stake.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for securing this important and timely debate in the light of the Hendry review. Does he share my hope that the Minister will outline when he will share the Hendry review with Parliament? The review will provide great context for our future debates.

Stephen Crabb: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I look forward to the Minister addressing that point later this afternoon.

A key feature of UK energy policy, whatever else might be said, it that it is not neutral. It does not rely solely on market choices to drive new investment. To that extent, we have an activist energy policy that demands big, difficult and timely choices from Ministers. A core objective of recent UK energy strategy, as the last Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), said last year, is to ensure “enough electricity generation to power the nation.”

As ageing and dirty power plants are retired from use, delivering on that objective becomes more challenging. National Grid now projects that, without emergency measures, the UK’s winter electricity margin stands at just 0.1%.

The vision we are discussing today speaks directly to that energy challenge. How do we harness the phenomenal tidal range that surrounds our country to replace many of the ageing power plants that are being decommissioned?

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is encouraging that the right hon. Gentleman is a former Secretary of State for Wales and for Work and Pensions, and he has support from the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams), a Treasury Parliamentary Private Secretary, which gives me hope that perhaps there is something in the wind to suggest that we might get the early decision for which he is calling—we would support such a decision. Will he support me in asking the Minister to give us a decision before the end of this year?

Stephen Crabb: It would be fabulous to have a sense of the timeframe in which the Minister will be making his decision, but it might be unfair to ask him to provide one today, given that he probably has not yet seen the contents of the review. I do not even know the length of the report, and it might take a bit of time to digest. The key point raised by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) is essential: we need a timely decision in the shortest possible timeframe.

The vision of harnessing tidal energy is exactly why Tidal Lagoon Power was started five years ago with the aim of providing home-grown, secure power from a fleet of tidal lagoons around the British coast that could provide low-cost, zero-carbon power for the next five generations, thereby building a new British industry of turbines, generators and turbine housing, with all the manufacturing and engineering jobs, skills and investment that comes with it. That is a compelling and exciting vision of energy and industrial policy coming together in the national interest.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend, and hopefully the Minister, agree that the key point about this and other projects is that they represent long-term investment? The strike price that this project will achieve underlines that this is a cost-effective way of producing energy.

Stephen Crabb: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I will address that point later. It is with a long-term view and an appropriate framework of support for the right projects that the prospect of a new UK tidal energy industry is within reach, and with it a source capable of providing 10% or more of the UK’s total electricity requirements.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is making a fine speech. The strike price over 90 years is £36.50, which compares with the Hinkley Point strike price of £92.50 over 30 years, both at 2012 prices. Of course, it is often forgotten that nuclear has had 60 years of support, and 44% of the budget of the former Department of Energy and Climate Change was spent on addressing the legacy
of old nuclear. Putting all that together, Swansea bay and other tidal lagoons represent very good value for money.

Stephen Crabb: The point about comparability is well made. Although the purpose of this debate is not to do down any other energy source, I recognise that drawing such comparisons is right and proper in this context.

A tidal lagoon industry would mean multi-billion-pound infrastructure investments in two areas of the United Kingdom with ideal conditions for tidal lagoon infrastructure: the Severn estuary and the Liverpool bay and Irish sea area. I understand that about a dozen viable sites have been flagged to Charles Hendry as part of his investigations, and that Tidal Lagoon Power is working on specific projects for five of those sites, starting with a pathfinder project in Swansea bay and moving shortly afterward to the first full-scale lagoon in Cardiff.

New manufacturing facilities to serve the various lagoon sites across England and Wales will be served by a UK-wide supply chain. Original manufacturing will be spread throughout the UK; particularly important components will come from a number of regional centres of excellence, mirroring the UK’s historic manufacturing heartlands, including South Yorkshire, south and west Wales, the west midlands, western Scotland, Tyneside and Teesside.

A UK tidal lagoon industry would represent a world first. The wide body of bespoke maintenance and engineering expertise it would build up could lead to the export of skills, knowledge and human resource to projects in the first phase of international tidal lagoon deployment, potentially securing up to 80% of global market value in that space. That is absolutely what UK industrial strategy should be all about: renewing and enlarging world-class manufacturing and engineering skills right across the United Kingdom.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend have any views, or evidence of any views, about how the cost per unit, or per bay created, might drop as the industry gets under way? I am thinking of the solar photovoltaic industry, where the cost per unit has decreased dramatically over many years. It is important that we have some sense of how much cheaper tidal lagoon energy might become, because the costs will ultimately be borne by consumers through their energy bills. Many people are struggling for cash these days, and we are trying to drive up the productivity of the UK economy, so lower long-term cost to the consumer if we can make it work will be an important prize to gain.

Stephen Crabb: That question goes absolutely to the heart of the matter, and I will address it in a bit more detail later. The figures that I have seen from Tidal Lagoon Power demonstrate that as we move from the pathfinder project in Swansea to the larger full-scale fleet of lagoons starting in Cardiff, the costs of energy generation decrease markedly. That does not even assume any of what economists call project learnings, which help to drive efficiencies in future projects.

Stephen Crabb: Again, my hon. Friend demonstrates his knowledge of the potential industry that we are discussing. His point is well made.

It is envisaged that the machining and pre-assembly of the turbines will take place at a new purpose-built facility in the Swansea bay city region. Heavy fabrication of steel components will take place at a new purpose-built facility, also in the region. Final full assembly of the turbines will take place on site in the turbine housing itself. The turbines’ control systems and generators, which connect to the turbines and generate renewable electricity, will be manufactured in Rugby, also from a majority of British-made parts. Meanwhile, a Stafford facility will provide high-voltage switch gear and control and protection systems, all of which demonstrates the UK-wide potential for the supply chain to serve a new tidal lagoon industry.

Quite simply, the development of a fleet of tidal lagoons, starting with Swansea, would provide an enormous boost to UK civil and electrical engineering, our manufacturing sector and our domestic steel industry. According to Graham Honeyman, chief executive of Sheffield Forgemasters:

“Being part of the Tidal Lagoon project would be an important win for this business. The prospect of working on a new power generation concept is an exciting one and is inspiring to our team. The possibilities for this concept, which could play a huge part in addressing the global power deficit, are vast. For such a project to be delivered through British designs and implementation would also be a great boost to the UK economy.”

Mr MacNeill: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way again; he is making a fine speech. What he and other Government Members have been talking about is first mover advantage. We could make a strong case for first mover advantage. I hope that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is listening to that point. It should not be seen in any way as a cost to consumers. The previous Department was obsessed with snapshots of the cost to consumers in the present, whereas we should be looking towards long-term savings to consumers that will eventually be achieved through this work and the first mover advantage.

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. If we are serious about rebalancing the economy, revitalising our industrial sector and creating new high-quality manufacturing jobs and apprenticeships, we need real and substantial projects to enable that to happen. The proposals for a tidal lagoon industry comprising five or more lagoon projects around the UK represent exactly the kind of new thinking that we need for our industrial strategy.

Tidal lagoons would mean new jobs, requiring new skills for a new industry. To give one example, there is currently no UK facility of sufficient size to serve the tidal lagoon sector with caissons, the large watertight chambers in which construction work may be carried out underwater. Tidal Lagoon Power and its partners have identified a number of potential sites for such a...
purpose-built facility around the Welsh and Scottish coastlines. The construction of such a facility would further enhance the UK’s civil engineering capability and upskill our industrial workforce.

In a report to Tidal Lagoon Power extending its earlier work for the Welsh Government, Miller Research and SEMTA found that the development of four tidal lagoons in Welsh waters would support 22,000 jobs in manufacturing and assembling the main component parts of the turbines, generators and sluices, which equates to 15% of the total number of people working in manufacturing in Wales in 2014.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman and I agree on the importance of low-carbon technology, particularly to port communities in west Wales such as the ones that he and I represent. They have natural deep water and the facilities and skills from previous industries. Rather than reinventing the purposes of those ports, we should continue their excellent record of serving the energy sector.

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point that is well understood in Government. The Government recognise the particular importance of ports as linchpins in their local economies.

If Ministers choose to harness our abundant natural resources and, in doing so, launch a new industry here in Britain, just as the Danes did with wind, we will secure a considerable competitive advantage over new market entrants from day one. Britain’s first post-Brexit industry will not only underwrite a strong domestic order book but help to put us at the front of the queue in future technology export markets. If we seize the moment now, wherever a new tidal power project is commissioned in future—from Garorim bay in South Korea to the Gulf of Kutch in India—there is every chance that the people, the parts and the components that build it will contain the words “Made in Britain”.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): The Hendry report is good news for the Swansea bay tidal lagoon, after five years spent raising £48 million. The right hon. Gentleman is making a valid point about the jobs that it would create, but it would also create apprenticeships, which we in Wales need at the moment. What are his views on that?

Stephen Crabb: Perhaps we need another occasion to talk more fully about the role that apprenticeships play in rebalancing the economy, but the hon. Lady makes a vital point. If we are to have a new tidal lagoon industry, there is a lot of training to be done. A lot of new skills need to be brought into the workforce, so one can readily see that apprenticeships will play a key role.

I will draw my remarks to a close by drawing attention to the elephant in the room, which a number of hon. Members have already mentioned: money and affordability. I was discussing the Swansea tidal lagoon project with one Minister recently who described it to me as “eye-wateringly expensive”. When I pressed him on that, it became embarrassingly clear that he did not understand the project at all and was merely repeating what he had heard someone else say about it. A myth of unaffordability has grown up around the vision of tidal lagoons as it has developed over the last five years.

Let us be clear: the projected investment costs should not deter us. We know that investors are ready to support the Swansea bay project, whose overall project cost is about £1 billion to achieve construction and connection to the national grid. Tidal Lagoon Power has already spent around £50 million on the development work, and another tranche of money is ready to be used to bring the project to financial close, as long as the Government give the green light. Of the total capital investment of around £1.3 billion, we know that around 84p of every £1 will be spent here in the UK, and at least 50% of that will be spent in Wales. For the Welsh economy, a project of that scale would certainly help to move the dial in terms of gross value added.

We have still have not addressed the crucial point on which this whole thing hangs: value for money. I am interested to see what the Hendry review says about it, but after seeing the figures that crossed my desk when I was a Minister, and again more recently, I have been greatly encouraged that the project does represent value for money. By taking a long-term view of the asset—for that is what it is: a long-term source of power generation—and using established modelling that will be familiar to Treasury officials, the current net value of subsidy for Swansea could amount to a contract for difference equivalent of £89.90 per megawatt-hour. We would be talking about a 90-year contract with a diminishing subsidy each year for 35 years—because it is de-linked from inflation—which then starts to pay money back to the Government for the rest of the life of the contract. That compares favourably with Hinkley C, which locks in an escalating strike price with a contract for difference of £92.50 per megawatt-hour.

The point is that it is affordable: Swansea bay tidal lagoon would put an additional 18p on to household bills, and would require only 0.41% of the 2020-21 levy control framework budget in its first year. By its 35th year, Swansea bay would require just 0.15%—effectively a rounding error—of the levy control framework budget. To put that into context, Hinkley C will add around £12 to household bills.

Geraint Davies: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that because the value of the pound plummeted by something like 20% after the news of Brexit—I think it is now down by around 14%—the lagoon will be much greater value for money, because it obviously costs more to import oil and energy if sterling has a low value?

Stephen Crabb: I genuinely do not know about that. We are discussing the long-term view. I do not know what oil and gas prices, or the value of sterling, will be in six months, let alone in 35 years.

The Swansea bay project does have strong credentials as a stand-alone project, but think about a Cardiff tidal lagoon as the first full-scale project. That would see the cost of electricity drop markedly, with a potential contract that could, I am told, take around £3 off the average household electricity bill. That is why it is so important to talk about a tidal lagoon industry, not just about doing Swansea as a one-off. It is the fleet of full-scale lagoons that will unlock the full energy opportunity for the UK. If we get it right, the country will win with low-cost, reliable and clean power and the emergence of a new globally significant industry here in the UK.
Tidal power is reliable, as well as clean, and it is not subject to the vagaries of the weather. It is predictable—we know exactly when every high tide will be for years ahead—and tidal lagoon systems will be built to last for at least 120 years, making them all the more worthy of investment.

We have a unique and historic industrial opportunity before us, and we absolutely should seize it. We have the natural resource on our coastline, and we need new sources of low-carbon power. We have a rich industrial heritage that has bequeathed us the skills, the capabilities and the ambition to take on the challenge. After five years and expenditure of more than £50 million, the pathfinder project at Swansea bay is almost ready to start construction. The project has planning consent, strong funders, strong industrial partners, political and public support, and a delivery team and supply chain ready to kick into action. It has also proved to the international marketplace that the successful commercial development of tidal lagoon infrastructure can be achieved.

I urge the Minister not to delay in his consideration of the Hendry review. I urge him to seize the moment, to give the go-ahead to Swansea bay, and to launch this affordable, sustainable, first new post-Brexit British industry, which will serve our energy needs into the 22nd century.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. Because of the extensive interest in this subject, I have a list of at least nine Back Benchers to call to speak, so I am going to impose a four-minute limit on speeches. The Minister and shadow Minister have indicated that they have a considerable amount to say. With that in mind, we will move straightaway to Liz Saville Roberts.

2.54 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Gadeirydd. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing this debate, which I hope we can use to build the cross-party consensus that we need to get moving on tidal lagoons, as well as many other much needed Welsh infrastructure projects. The Government seem to be rather caught in the headlights of Brexit.

I shall make my case for increased investment and urgency in the development of tidal lagoons in three parts. First, and most appropriately, I will outline the benefits of tidal lagoons for meeting current and future energy capacity requirements. I will then briefly touch on how they can contribute to our environmental targets, before finally outlining the economic benefits. Those Members who are familiar with energy policy will recognise my speech as an expanded response to what is known as the energy trilemma. I will conclude by highlighting the deficiencies in the Wales Bill and how it continues to hamper Wales’s ability to make use of its natural resources.

Eighteen major power stations, totalling 17,767 MW of capacity, have closed since 2012. By 2020, the amount of lost power is expected to rise to over 38,000 MW, representing more than a third of our current capacity. According to Tidal Lagoon Power, that means that, having put everything else into the mix, we will end up with a 32 GW deficit.

The 350 MW Swansea bay tidal lagoon will pave the way for projects between Cardiff and Newport, which are planned at equal capacity to Hinkley Point C. The projects will generate the lowest-cost electricity of all new power stations, and can be online in the mid-2020s. A 3,000-plus MW lagoon on the north Wales coast is planned for completion shortly afterwards, with two other projects in the pipeline for development slightly further down the line. As a fleet, the five scoped projects can generate secure, clean energy for 30% of UK homes for 120 years.

We face a clear and present risk when it comes to our long-term energy security. The highly predictable and secure energy created by tidal lagoons means that they face few of the uncertainties or dangers of other carbon-neutral technologies. A home-grown industry, producing power on our shores—what is more secure than that? What is there to like more than that?

I turn briefly to the role of tidal lagoons in meeting environmental targets, which is the second aspect of the energy trilemma. Whatever the impact of Brexit on the UK’s energy and environmental policy, under the Climate Change Act 2008, we are committed to reducing carbon emissions by 57% by 2030, on 1990 levels. As recognised by the Committee on Climate Change, it is likely that new technologies, including tidal lagoons, need to be implemented to meet that target.

In Wales, our abundant resources, particularly tidal energy, give us huge potential to become a world leader in carbon-neutral energy generation. However, Westminster is the dog in the manger when it comes to Wales’s abundant natural resources. For centuries we have been reined back from cultivating and benefiting from our own resources because of arbitrary restrictions from Westminster.

The third aspect of the trilemma is often referred to as energy equity—that is, the affordability of energy for consumers—but I shall also touch on the broader economic implications of tidal lagoons. As the first of its kind, Swansea bay tidal lagoon is undoubtedly more expensive than some of the rival technologies. However, as the project is small, its impact on household electricity bills will be small as well. For consumers, Swansea bay’s real benefits lie in its ability to act as a catalyst for an industry of cost-effective renewable energy in the form of future tidal lagoons.

That said, at a local level, during construction, Swansea alone will employ 2,323 workers, and 181 during operation. It will add around £316 million of gross value added throughout construction, and £76 million annually thereafter. We must also remember the possibilities for exporting the technology. At a time when exports are crucial to the future of the economy, why are the Government dragging their heels on the issue of getting shovelsover the ground at Swansea? We can demonstrate to the world that we can lead the way on innovative technological solutions to our energy needs.

I conclude by highlighting the vicissitudes that Wales endures from Westminster. Despite Wales having a natural treasure trove of renewable resources, particularly tidal energy, Westminster refuses to let Welsh people benefit from their own environment.

Unlike under any other devolution settlement, under the current Wales Bill, there will be an arbitrary 350 MW cap on what our National Assembly can develop. That means...
Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady will resume her seat.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edgsville) (Con): I am very grateful to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) has painted the golden uplands of tidal power, but while it is of strategic importance the cost is eye-watering. Although 50% of the benefit may go to Wales, it is the poorest consumers who will end up paying the subsidy on this project. I therefore urge the Minister to exercise caution in relation to the project. There are undoubted benefits, should the predictions come true about Swansea bay tidal lagoon power, but there is no guarantee that subsequent projects will be delivered, or that they will secure licensing consents from Natural Resources Wales. Past experience of energy projects at Milford Haven docks shows that there can be substantial delays in obtaining consents from NRW.

It is clear that the pricing for the tidal lagoon is far more expensive than Hinkley Point. It runs over a 90-year contract, whereas the Hinkley Point contract runs only for 35 years. The difference in the contract for difference is that decommissioning costs are included in the Hinkley Point contract. That makes tidal power—or this particular project—look very expensive. When one considers that the initial bid was £168 per megawatt-hour, one can see why a degree of caution needs to be exercised and why there has been movement away from the project. Would unique intellectual property be generated in the UK that would benefit the UK? Clearly, there would be skills advantages. I accept my right hon. Friend’s arguments about the skills benefits that could be gained and the engineering benefits that could come to the UK. However, those are not unique skills. They are very transferable. They can be taken anywhere and there would be no guarantee of their subsequently returning. We would be the first adopter, but there is no guarantee that we would retain the benefits, because of the lack of IP that would accrue to what amounted, in effect, to more than £2 billion-worth of subsidy from the British taxpayer.

I therefore urge the Minister to be cautious. I look forward to reading the Hendry report and seeing the evidence base, which I know has been looked into in great detail. The project has potential, but not at the strike price that is proposed.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing this important debate. I am here this afternoon to put on record my support for the proposed tidal lagoon developments, particularly the one in west Cumbria, which would be situated on the Solway firth at Maryport in my constituency.

Hon. Members may know that, in west Cumbria, we market ourselves under the name of “Britain’s Energy Coast”. We started with Calder Hall, which is now part of Sellafield. We were home to the world’s first commercial nuclear power station and we now have the proposed nuclear new build at Moorside, which we hope will be given the go-ahead soon, following the welcome announcement about Hinkley Point C.

It has been reported that the west Cumbria tidal lagoon, with its 90 turbines set in the breakwater, could have a generating capacity of 2 GW. If that capacity is added to the 3.4 GW of capacity that would be produced by Moorside, west Cumbria alone would produce around 10% of the UK’s electricity needs.

The Tidal Lagoon Power group states on its website:

“In addition to helping the UK transition to a low carbon future—providing secure and affordable low carbon energy—we believe that a West Cumbrian lagoon could be uniquely positioned to deliver a range of economic, social and environmental benefits which are strongly aligned with local priorities for economic growth, tourism and leisure, flood risk management”—

“flood risk management is very important for my constituency—

“coastal erosion, infrastructure improvement and social inclusion.”

Maryport is a beautiful coastal town, but it badly needs a boost and a west Cumbrian tidal lagoon could bring huge economic benefits—thousands of jobs during the construction period, as well as regeneration and investment in the local community. It has also been suggested that there could be a factory to build the turbines near the port of Workington, which would give that area, and the port, a big boost.

The lagoon company has been consulting local people closely, but it is important that it listens to the local fishermen, who have expressed concerns to me. Their livelihood comes from the waters of the Solway. I am glad that the Tidal Lagoon Power group has said that it is setting up a fisheries peer review group to advise on the effects on fish. The group must do everything in its power not to disadvantage the fishermen.

I have been really impressed by Tidal Lagoon Power’s comprehensive strategy for the wider community in Swansea bay. As the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire said, it is seeking to invest in recreation, tourism, sport and the arts, which is exactly what we need in west Cumbria. The Solway firth is beautiful; it is a hidden gem. More people need to know about it, to visit our attractions and to taste our local food, particularly the seafood, so that they know that there is so much more to Cumbria than just the Lake district. If hon. Members have a few moments this afternoon, we are having a Cumbria day in the Attlee suite. I urge them to come along and taste some of the delicacies on offer.

In conclusion, I absolutely support the pathfinder tidal lagoon project in Swansea bay. I am pleased to hear that Charles Hendry’s report appears to be imminent and I urge the Minister to let us know when it will be published, so that we can all take a look at it. If we can get this first project off the ground, areas such as the one I represent will be able to benefit greatly from this huge investment in our future, which will also help to bridge the national energy gap and ensure that we meet our international climate change commitments.”
Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Paisley, for calling me to speak. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing the debate.

My constituency of Aberavon, along with that of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), a neighbouring constituency, would be the home of the Swansea bay tidal lagoon project, which would be the first such project in the world. Tidal lagoon power is an idea whose time has come. The Swansea bay tidal lagoon would produce enough energy to power 150,000 Welsh homes for 120 years, meeting 11% of Welsh energy needs with clean, green, reliable and sustainable energy, saving almost a quarter of a million tonnes of carbon during each year of operations. It would directly sustain over 2,000 construction and manufacturing jobs in Wales, and support as many as 311 UK industrial and manufacturing businesses along the supply chain. Crucially for my Aberavon constituency, the project will require more than 100,000 tonnes of steel, much of which will come through the Port Talbot steelworks. Tidal Lagoon Power has committed to procuring as much steel as possible from UK suppliers and it should be commended for making that pledge and held to it.

As the project will be the first of its kind in the world, it is estimated that, in its first year, 200,000 people will visit the lagoon to see the national boating centre and other facilities. That will mean £8 million in tourism revenue, including £2 million from the oyster-shaped visitor centre, £500,000 from the national boating centre and almost £1 million from the elite performance sports centre. The project has the support of almost 90% of local stakeholders and it was included in the manifesto upon which every major party stood at the last general election. In sum, the Government are fast running out of excuses for delaying a positive decision.

A final decision will, of course, be made following consideration of the Hendry review. That was supposed to have been received before the autumn statement, but we understand that the Government asked for the report to be delayed, in the light of the possible ramifications of other announcements. Can the Minister please inform us what impact, if any, the autumn statement has had on the review?

We now understand that the review is expected to be submitted to the Secretary of State this afternoon. Can the Minister please inform the House whether the review has already been submitted? If not, when will it be submitted? Will he commit to his Department publishing the Hendry review publicly?

Members of this House, our constituents and local businesses should see the review and the case presented by Hendry either for or against tidal lagoon power. There are live investment decisions that need to be made or at least planned imminently. For the decisions to go forward, investors need at the very least a clear sense of the decision-making and implementation process. Will the Minister please make clear what the formal decision-making process will be and when we can expect a public decision? Will we have to wait until the Budget? Will the Secretary of State make a statement in the coming months either as a separate stand alone statement or as part of his national industrial strategy statement? Will the Government also make it clear what the timescale and process will be for implementation of any decision following the Hendry review? Investors, business and our communities need an end to the uncertainty. All major parties made clear manifesto commitments to tidal lagoons and in particular to the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. It is about time we fulfilled those commitments and delivered jobs, energy and opportunity to the Swansea bay region.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you very much, Mr Paisley, for calling me to speak. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Paisley. I am glad to have a colleague in the Chair. I also thank the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) for presenting such a good case.

Strangford lough in my constituency is one of the most beautiful loughs in the whole world. I defy any Member of this House to come and have a coffee and a delicious scone in Harrisons of Greyabbey, sit on the veranda looking over the lough and argue that the view could be beaten. I would argue that the view could never, ever be beaten. Not only is Strangford lough the most beautiful, but it has the potential for so much energy production. Indeed, we were proud to trial the world’s first tidal current energy turbine, the SeaGen. Tidal power is an important part of any renewable energy plan as it is a guaranteed source of power and, unlike wind power, can be relied on every day. Generating electricity from two massive underwater propellers, the SeaGen was lowered into place in 2008 and bolted to the seabed in one of the world’s fastest tidal currents.

Strangford lough is one of Europe’s most protected areas, providing unique habitats for marine and bird life. It is a Ramsar area and also an area of special scientific interest. The location was chosen for the turbine project because it offered sheltered waters close to shore, but still exposed the generating device to the full rigours of the tides. The pull of the waters of the Narrows in Portaferry and Strangford is significant and in the early stages some of the blades were damaged. SeaGen generated 1.2 MW; enough power for around 1,500 homes.

There were of course environmental aspects and questions. A study of the environmental impact of SeaGen will, I hope, open the door for other such projects. There had been fears that large marine mammals such as seals would be hit by the propellers. We have a good colony of seals in Strangford lough. The environmental monitoring report that gave the all-clear stated: “There have been no changes in abundance of either seals or porpoises detected which can be attributed to SeaGen; seals and porpoises are continuing to swim past SeaGen, demonstrating a lack of any concern or hindrance.”

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as the United Kingdom prepares to leave the European Union, it is essential that we get the energy strategy correct across the whole of the United Kingdom, so that we can offer companies a competitive spirit for business?

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. As a businessman, he focuses on the issues that we want the debate to focus on. The Minister will, I hope, respond to that.
The SeaGen project ended and was dismantled in January this year. The years of operation have opened the door for other such tests. There has been consideration of similar projects on a larger scale in other coastal areas, so the SeaGen project in Strangford lough has given the necessary information to the Department to use for further projects. Perhaps the Minister will give us some idea of how the SeaGen project can be used for the furtherment of other projects.

My opinion is clear: the less dependent we are on crude oil and its supply from other countries, and the more we can get from our own renewable resources, the better. I support such projects for that reason.

The levy control framework, established by the former Department of Energy and Climate Change and Her Majesty’s Treasury, set a cap for the forecast costs of certain policies funded through levies on energy companies and ultimately to be paid for by consumers. Since November 2012, the framework has covered three schemes to support investment in low-carbon energy generation: the renewables obligation, feed-in tariffs and contracts for difference. It sets annual caps on costs for each year to 2020-21, with a cap of £7.6 billion in 2020-21, in 2011-12 prices. According to the latest forecast, the schemes are expected to exceed the cap and will cost £8.7 billion by 2020-21. That is equivalent to £110—around 11%—on the typical household fuel energy bill in 2020. That is £17 more than if the schemes stayed within the cap.

I will conclude shortly. I understand other Members want to speak, so I will not take extra time. We need to do more, and projects such as SeaGen at Strangford lough are possibly the way to go as they also seek to address the environmental impact duty that we must stick by. The environmental reasons for renewable energy are clear and compelling. Although I am not someone who would ban the use of fossil fuel or nuclear reactors as needed, I do feel we should make the most of the great resources that we have in our tidal energy provision. I am anxious to see how we can develop that in Strangford lough and throughout the Province—indeed, across this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—so that we rely less on fossil fuels and other energy sources that are not on our doorstep.

3.19 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. The lagoon is located in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). Since I was elected the people of Swansea East have made it abundantly clear that the tidal lagoon is one of the issues that matters most to them. It matters for jobs, for investment, for business and for industry.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The hon. Lady is talking about investment in jobs, and there will be an impact in my constituency, where GE will build the 16 generators, involving £18 million of investment in the plant at Rugby and the creation of 100 additional skilled design, installation, service and maintenance roles. Is not that a compelling reason to proceed?

Carolyn Harris: That was very clever of the hon. Gentleman, and yes, it is a compelling reason.
Most of all, the project matters for the sake of hope, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman’s constituents will now have. It was, and remains, a beacon of hope for a region in transition. Swansea knows a thing or two about making the most of its natural assets, but our once great industries are now in decline and our city has suffered as a result. When the lagoon plan emerged—a modern plan for a new low-carbon era that would once again place Swansea’s natural resources at its core and redeploys a skilled and committed workforce built up over decades—we questioned, probed and challenged. When we were satisfied with the answers we received, we backed it to the hilt. Let me make it abundantly clear: Swansea supports the tidal lagoon, but more importantly, it needs it. It is the foundation stone for our city deal. It is important for the regeneration of our waterfront; for our plans to get people back into work; for retaining the next generation of talent; and for showcasing to the UK and the world a city that I am proud to call home.

I was sceptical about the need for an independent review, but I am delighted to report that those of us who saw the review in action were impressed by its engagement and transparency. However, it is now finished, and I hope that the Minister will explain what we can expect next. We have heard this afternoon that the review may be lodged today, so we need to know what the next steps are. We have seen the views of the 40-strong all-party group and the more than 100 Back-Bench MPs from across the House who signed the Government to support the project. Now is the time for the Government to put their money where their mouth is. Now the deed is done, and we need to know where we go from here. We need to know that Swansea will get the tidal lagoon it deserves.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I too congratulate the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on obtaining this timely debate. He mentioned that the Hendry review is with the Government this afternoon, and I share the desire to hear about it from Ministers as soon as possible. The debate is a demonstration of how much cross-party support there is in this place, as my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) said, for the development of tidal lagoons. That support is pretty unique, and indeed there is also cross-party engagement and endearment. However, it is now finished, and I hope that the Minister will explain what we can expect next.

We all hope that the Minister will have something to say this afternoon about when he will share the Hendry report with the House, as it was not mentioned in the autumn statement. The delay is frustrating, because we want the Swansea bay tidal lagoon to go ahead—and, as others have said, not just as a one-off or a stand-alone project, but as a pathfinder for yet more tidal lagoons across Wales and beyond, including in Newport, as set out in Tidal Lagoon Power’s plans. A couple of streets away from my home there are the most beautiful views of the expanse of the Severn estuary. From my constituency office on the banks of the Usk we can watch the dramatic rise and fall of the second highest tidal range in the world every day. It is an amazing natural resource on our doorstep, and we are just not using it. At a time when we desperately need clean, secure energy, year-round, entirely predictable energy, tidal lagoon technology is the key to delivering a low-carbon energy future in Wales. We have to grasp that opportunity.

The benefits for Wales and elsewhere have been clearly spelled out in this debate. They include the chance for Wales to be a global leader in the technology, starting in Swansea. More than 2,000 direct jobs would be created in the manufacturing and construction processes, and many more would be created in tourism and the supply chain. There would be a huge boost to the Welsh economy. There would also be the potential for long-term cost reduction as more lagoon technology was built, and, importantly, for exporting the technology. A Newport lagoon further down the line would bring construction jobs and the chance to use Welsh steel, which my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) mentioned—it has been an incredibly difficult time for that industry. The Liberty House Group in my constituency supports the project; a lagoon in Newport would be less than a mile from its steel plant, which I visited recently.

The project is not only a matter of renewable energy generation and playing our part in meeting climate change targets. There is also a chance for coastal regeneration and a boost to recreation and tourism. The leader of Newport City Council, Debbie Wilcox, has given it her backing and said it is a “marvellous opportunity for Newport”. There is huge added value in the project—not least from up to 33,000 jobs at the four lagoons in Wales, were they to go ahead. It is an amazing opportunity that we should grasp for Swansea, yes—but also for Newport. I urge the Government to make a timely decision.

3.25 pm

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. It has been a good debate and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing it and on the manner in which he made his case. It is notable that with the honourable exception of the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) everyone who has spoken so far in the debate has been in favour of the project; there were speakers from all the nations and several regions of the UK, and all bar one were in support. Debates such as this bring me out in a bit of a cold sweat, because I may have to brutalise some constituency names that I do not know how to pronounce. I thank all those who mentioned the constituency of the right hon. Gentleman and saved me from pronouncing it as if it might normally follow the word “Elvis”—that is how I would have read it. Such debates are an educational process for many of us, and this one has certainly been educational for me with respect to learning to pronounce the names of parts of the beautiful country of Wales.

The speech of the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire touched many key points, and these were replicated by many Members who spoke. The project is potentially a key part of the Government’s industrial strategy, and the cross-party support that it enjoys is balanced by its cross-cutting benefits. It is not
just an energy project; we have heard that it will boost tourism and support the steel industry. It also ticks a number of the boxes on which the Government are trying to deliver with their nascent industrial strategy. It links business with energy; it provides a low-carbon technology; it has the potential to spread the economic benefit and boost economic growth outwith London and the south-east of England; and it has the potential to develop a sizeable and exportable technology. Those are all things that, I think, we would like.

There may be issues as to the cost, as the hon. Member for Eddisbury said. However, as I often do when we discuss technology of this kind, I remind the House that we must ask not only the cost of doing something, but the cost of not doing it. It may be difficult to account for that, and it will be interesting to see whether the Hendry review touches on it. However, the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire said that we should aim to emulate the Danes in their development of onshore wind. They have developed an industry and have world-leading technology and exports coming from that. I sought to intervene on the right hon. Gentleman, but my attempt was somewhat lost in the debate. As well as emulating the Danes, we need to make sure we do not emulate ourselves as to what we did in relation to onshore wind technology. The original leaders in that technology were here, and the lead was ceded to the Danes who picked it up and ran with it, and are now in an enviable position. Let us not repeat our mistake over onshore wind with tidal technologies.

Tidal lagoons and technologies are an important aspect of the matter, but not the only one. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, mentioned the potential of the tidal scheme—SeaGen—in Strangford lough; and in the Pentland firth between Scotland and the Isles of Orkney there have been world firsts in the deployment of tidal turbines in an area renowned for its tides. That has potential, and I would like to question the Minister about the contracts for difference that were announced last month. We know that they have excluded technologies that are cheaper than offshore wind—onshore wind and solar will not be allowed to bid in—but technologies that are more expensive have also, effectively, been excluded. Essentially, we will have a competitive option process that only one technology will be able to win. That does not seem like fair competition to me—it would mean a broken promise to the tidal industry—and I hope that the Minister can address the matter. That promise of a de minimis amount of electricity through the contract for difference process has seen the development of several stages of proposals that would look to bid in—in particular, MeyGen in the Pentland firth. That could be part of a compelling story of a UK tidal industry, with the tidal lagoons and turbines as compatible—sister—technologies in which we could be a world leader. I wholeheartedly support the deployment of offshore wind, but not its being the only show in town. Because of the Government’s decision—their fixation, it would seem, on that technology—we risk losing one aspect of that story. I really hope that the Government will reconsider their decision and engage with those looking to pursue the schemes to see what can be done to develop them.

I will not take up my full amount of time, but I want to return to tidal lagoons. The scheme ticks many boxes and its development has support across the Chamber and, I think, Parliament as a whole. The lagoon will be a pathfinder in Swansea, the first of its kind. We have a history of developing energy technologies in which numerous firsts of a kind have turned into ones of a kind. I hope that Swansea goes ahead but, if it does, it must be a pathfinder. It must be a scheme that leads to the development of a technology. There is no point in our paying a large amount of money to do this once, then not learning from it, not reaping benefits for future development and, most importantly, not having the technology to export. I fully support the scheme, as does my party.

3.32 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We have had an excellent debate, with contributions from Members on both sides of the Chamber indicating almost unanimous support for the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. That outcome—the clash of ideas in the white-hot heat of full agreement—should be impressed on the Minister. Even though there was what might be regarded as one dissenting view from the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), I think that she supports the idea. She made some important points about value of money and about how careful one needs to be to get that right.

We can, I think, say that there is agreement, more or less, about the principle of the Swansea bay tidal lagoon and full agreement, at least by the Opposition, about the practice. Indeed, Opposition turnout and the first-rate contributions made by my hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), Swansea West (Geraint Davies), Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), Newport East (Jessica Morden) and Workington (Sue Hayman), and by the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig), indicate just how full the support is on this side of the House, not just from south Wales Members but across the country. I think that is because we need to make it clear that support for Swansea needs to be based, as Members have emphasised, not just on whether we build that tidal lagoon but on what it means for tidal lagoon technology for the UK’s future and what it means also for the series of lagoons that can come about as a result of the Swansea proving lagoon.

That series of tidal lagoons is not a concept based on thin air; it is not about harnessing an as yet untried technology that might come from the middle of nowhere and save us as far as low-carbon power is concerned. Essentially, it works on a simple principle of proven, well-known technology, of water entering the lagoon subject to its flow through a turbine, both when it is coming in and on its release when the lagoon is full, that allows for the generation of some 14 hours of utterly predictable power. We know that the principle works well because, as the Rance barrage in France has shown, the technology is reliable over many years and, as has been mentioned, it is a power source with a lifetime far in excess of those estimated for wind, gas and even nuclear. It is likely also that the outage time over a long period will be relatively low.

Swansea is not a large lagoon in terms of what is possible. It will have an installed capacity of 350 MW, which is approximately a tenth of the most worked-up second lagoon, in Cardiff bay, which comes in at a capacity close to that of Hinkley Point C power station. However, it is the possibility of Swansea being the
proving ground for a number of tidal lagoons that will not only be cheaper to construct and operate than Swansea but will open up the prospect of a large contribution—perhaps 10%—of our electrical power needs that ought to be a condition for supporting it. What we should be investing in as a country is not Swansea, but Swansea and the prospect of all the others as a major component of our future energy make-up.

As Members have mentioned, as far as our country’s overall energy make-up is concerned, power plant is going offline at an alarming rate, with 23 GW of conventional thermal plant being closed or mothballed since 2010, and a further 24 GW—mostly of coal and nuclear—to be closed by 2025. It is unlikely that nuclear will even begin to make up that gap. Hinkley is delayed by longer than seven years and will probably not be on line until 2026-27 and, according to the latest consultation, coal is due to come offline by 2025.

We need replacements for the lost capacity, and a lot of that will come from the aggregation of renewables, but at present the only plan appears to be that gas-fired power stations will be built out at some pace between now and the late 2020s. We know that gas power stations are not, at present, getting built and, indeed, the Government are pursuing expensive capacity market operations—with an auction today or thereabouts possibly costing us £2.5 billion—for capacity over the next period. That is the last chance saloon, one might say, for gas plant procurement under the present arrangements.

Swansea, and other lagoons, would certainly serve as a substantial alternative to some of that build, which, if procured, would cost substantial amounts—something that needs to be taken into account where value for money is concerned. All energy, at the moment, is expensive to build. All energy, at the moment, is being subsidised in its build. It is not about considering just what Swansea might cost but about what the alternatives might cost as well. Under those circumstances, Swansea performs, in the long term, very well.

Within a few years, perhaps, a number of those replacement power stations will need replacing anyway. Meanwhile, Swansea and other lagoons would have sailed through the period, producing reliable ultra-low-carbon electricity. By the way, in terms of a larger lagoon strategy, they will be able to supply reliable and known amounts of power pretty much round the clock, for the simple reason that the time of high tide varies considerably along the UK coast. I always like to try to introduce a not very well known fact into my contributions. Hinkley C is delayed by longer than seven years and will probably not be on line until 2026-27 and, according to the latest consultation, coal is due to come offline by 2025.

It is not high tide in Swansea. High tide was at 10.20 am. Power could be produced seven hours either side of that high tide, which would overlap almost exactly with the power produced in Morecambe bay on its high tide. With a series of lagoons, there would be round-the-clock, reliable, known, predictable power that was just as predictable and round-the-clock as any nuclear power station or gas-fired power station that we might care to build in this country.

The benefits of developing Swansea and subsequent lagoons are manifest from a low-carbon energy point of view. As Members have alluded to, there would be considerable other benefits, too. Jobs and supply chains would be created, mostly in the UK. It is estimated that 65% of the pathfinder project spend will go on UK content, which is close to the figure achieved by the North sea oil and gas industry. There would be 200 jobs in Swansea and perhaps 11,000 jobs in Cardiff during construction, and several thousand jobs during operation.

Developing Swansea is important for what UK plc should be doing to secure the exportable potential of those technologies in which we are world leaders. We certainly are leading in tidal, tidal stream and wave.

As the hon. Member for Aberdeen South said, we only have to look back a little to see how close we came to securing exportable UK industry in wind before we lost our lead and most of our manufacturing and expertise to others, most notably Denmark, because we did not back the development of our world lead through industrial strategy. Yes, I have mentioned the words “industrial strategy”. It appears in the title of the new Department—the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—but there is still an absence of anything that looks like an actual industrial strategy from the Government. We were promised a Green Paper on industrial strategy would appear shortly. With lagoons, we have an industrial strategy in the round already, with jobs, a supply chain and exportability. It is running up to us, metaphorically asking us to bite its hand off, and at the moment we are not responding in a positive way.

In all of this, we have to consider the question of value for money, which the hon. Member for Eddisbury mentioned. Comparatively, lagoons provide value for money. Undoubtedly even Swansea will come in as a better value for money for electricity-generating purposes than the deal we have concluded with Hinkley C. Comparatively it is in the same league as offshore wind. A series of lagoons would certainly be much better value overall, although we need to cast our minds towards the longer term in thinking about value. Swansea is asking for a CfD for 60 years. That is half the operating life of the lagoon, with payments reducing substantially over that period. Swansea is not asking for a block CfD degressing through future projects; it is asking for a CfD degressing within the project’s lifetime.

I know the Government have not been idle in all this, although on the surface not much has happened since general support for the idea of the Swansea bay lagoon was included in the Conservative party’s 2015 election manifesto. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon said, it was also in the manifestos of all the other major parties. I hoped we would hear something positive about Swansea in the autumn statement, but nothing was announced. We will have to wait until the Hendry review has been examined. That review is headed by an estimable former Energy Minister, the right hon. Charles Hendry. I am confident he will have a positive look at value for money and the bigger picture I have described of the lagoon, but we do not know where that review is. We think it is on its way to Government as we speak, but we have not yet had any confirmation that it has been received, or whether there is a timetable for looking at that review or for action after it has been considered. I join my hon. Friends in calling for an early Government response to that review, even if a final decision about proceeding with the Swansea tidal lagoon has not been made.
I conclude by emphasising that timing is important. We have a worked-up, permitted, committed plan that cannot stand in suspended animation while people spend so long making up their mind. Swansea bay, in case anyone needs reminding, is not an interesting concept that we can cogitate on at our leisure, but a real project that needs to be developed within a reasonable timescale. Otherwise all the money invested in it—£50 million—will start to go stale and the project may fail, possibly never to be revived. We need to get on with it, not just for Swansea’s sake, but for the sake of a real solution that could be producing power by the very early 2020s if it is given the go-ahead now. It would be a solution for our mounting energy gap in the early part of the next decade.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): If the Minister can take about 12 minutes, that will give Mr Crabb a minute and a half to wind-up at the end.

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): Thank you very much, Mr Paisley. Members have already widely noted the honour it is to serve under your chairmanship, and I add my support to that sentiment. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing this important debate. It is testimony to him and the importance of the issue that he has generated such cross-party support and so many interesting speeches. The sentiment in the room has been so evident.

My right hon. Friend has long been a proponent of the economic benefits that tidal lagoons could bring to his constituency and to south Wales as a whole. Naturally, he and other Members here today are keen to understand better how the development of a tidal lagoon at Swansea specifically and a fleet of tidal lagoons around the UK coastline—were they to go ahead—would benefit their local economies. However, as he acknowledged, this is a difficult and complex question. The technology is new and untried, and the development warrants due care and consideration before decisions are taken. That is why in May the Government commissioned Charles Hendry to undertake an independent review of the strategic value of tidal lagoons in the UK. Among other things, the review was intended to consider whether and in what circumstances tidal lagoons could play a cost-effective role as part of the UK energy mix, to examine the potential scale of the opportunity, including in the supply chain, and to consider different sizes of projects as the first of a kind.

Contrary to what some Members have said, building a tidal lagoon in Swansea is not a manifesto commitment of the Conservative party, but it is mentioned in the manifesto. There is a commitment to explore the lagoon as a source of affordable energy, and that is exactly what Charles Hendry is being asked to do in his review. We are expecting him to deliver his report to Government very shortly. Colleagues may know better than me how short this is, but whenever that is, this debate is a timely opportunity to discuss the issues. Apparently, drafts have been sent to or discussed with officials—certainly in one case—but it is important to note that the review is not about Swansea as such. Rather, it is a general review of the costs and benefits of tidal energy. As it has not reported, it is irrelevant that the autumn statement has occurred, contrary to what some colleagues have tried to insist. It would be wrong for Government to announce anything while a review we had commissioned was under way. We look forward to receiving it and reading it with great interest.

The question has been raised as to whether, as my right hon. Friend said, there will be a timely and purposeful decision. Members asked when the Hendry review would be published and whether there would be a decision before the end of the year. Colleagues will understand that any decision before the end of the year would be unrealistic at this late stage, and my right hon. Friend acknowledged that. We will give this matter thorough and careful consideration. There will be no dragging of heels.

Geraint Davies: Is the Minister willing to set a target deadline that he will not go past? Will he say, “By June next year, we will try to do better,” or will he set no deadline at all?

Jesse Norman: The fairest thing to do is to see what the report says before we come to a view about an appropriate timetable. It would be quite wrong to prejudge the report and its conclusions.

For all the enthusiasm of my right hon. Friend, the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire for tidal lagoons, I note that he has taken a measured approach, respecting the complex issues that are being raised, for which I thank him. As he said to the House when he was Secretary of State for Wales, “The Swansea tidal lagoon proposition is very exciting and commands wide support across the business community in Wales, but we also need to recognise that the project is asking for a very significant level of public subsidy and intervention. It is absolutely right that the Government “should conduct very robust due diligence in making sure that such projects will deliver value for the taxpayer.”—[Official Report, 13 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 842.] That is precisely what we will do. We will take the time necessary to look at the review’s findings in relation to tidal lagoons, particularly in the context of a wider assessment of the nature of the UK’s future energy mix and our plans to reduce carbon emissions.

Last month, the Secretary of State set out his vision for how the energy sector should develop, in the context of our new UK industrial strategy. He recognises that the Government’s role must be to create the right framework for growth, harnessing both existing and new technologies, to deliver more secure, cleaner energy at a lower cost. That is our goal: a reliable, clean and inexpensive energy system.

Of course, new technologies such as tidal lagoons may have a role to play, but not at any cost. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) rightly raised several issues, and we look to the energy review and other discussions to resolve them. She raised not merely the issue of cost, but her concerns about the lack of intellectual property, planning uncertainty and delays. The Government should properly consider those issues as part of a wider decision-making process.

As colleagues know, the contract for difference allocation round, which we announced last month, is under way. Overall, our energy policies and priorities have not changed. It is worth saying, in relation to the remarks of the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig),
that it is not true that CfDs do not include tidal stream technologies, although it is true that there is no ring-fenced allocation for them within the auction. That is because our responsibility is to bill payers. Tidal stream, which is not a technology that we are specifically discussing in the context of tidal lagoons—it is a different technology—has a strike price about three times higher than that of offshore wind. Until those prices fall, it may be difficult for it to compete. When they do, it will come within the policy horizon.

Callum McCaig: In fairness to myself, I do not believe that I said it was excluded; I said it is effectively excluded, which the Minister may have touched upon himself. Ignoring the potential first mover advantage for tidal stream technology, how does he expect its price to come down if it does not have the support to deploy and develop a downward price trajectory?

Jesse Norman: That is a perfectly reasonable question. Historically, the expectation has always been that technologies have to demonstrate that they are capable of benefiting from support. Given that the distance in the range of cost is so high, a judgment has been made that that technology has not done so at the moment, but other technologies have succeeded in doing so.

Other colleagues raised issues such as the rate at which costs might fall with other lagoons, the degree to which different projects could inspire different learning, and the first mover advantages, all of which should be resolved and discussed in the context of the Hendry review.

Jim Shannon: In my contribution, I mentioned the SeaGen project in Strangford lough in Northern Ireland—a pilot scheme sponsored by the Government to get results in relation to the environment. Perhaps the Minister is going to tell us what the results of that pilot scheme are so that we have some idea of what we are doing now.

Jesse Norman: I am sorry to have given up time for that intervention, because I was coming to that point. SeaGen, as the hon. Gentleman recognises, was a research test bed, and it is being decommissioned now. It received a £10 million grant from the Department, and those conclusions are being carefully assessed. It is a project in which there has already been public investment. It is clear that we cannot allocate subsidies to every technology that asks for them. We have said that our focus will be on key technologies that have the potential to scale and deliver long-term cost savings, in which the UK has a comparative advantage and whose costs to consumers are acceptable.

Geraint Davies: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I am very short of time. I am so sorry. I have taken an awful lot of interventions, and I want to make progress.

I note the enthusiasm of my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire for the proposed Swansea bay project, but it is the Government’s job to consider the advantages and disadvantages and to scrutinise the evidence to ensure that decisions are taken in the longer-term interests of the UK and consumers. It is worth focusing on the significant uncertainties associated with the project—in particular, the use of a new and untried technology in a marine environment, the length of time over which the commitment would be made, and the planning issues, which have already been mentioned.

Since the debate on the economic impact of tidal lagoons in March, the Department has continued to have discussions with the developer of the Swansea bay lagoon. I cannot comment on those discussions, given their commercial nature, but the most recent proposal put forward by the developer would be a very significant deviation from current Government policy. It would not be impossible, but it would require careful consideration. We have always been clear that we will consider the findings of the independent review of tidal lagoons and all other relevant factors in deciding whether to proceed with negotiating a CfD on this project. The developer is aware of that.

The issue of value for money quite properly remains at the forefront. I mentioned the concerns about consents and leases, decommissioning and the supply chain. I note that the China Harbour Engineering Company is no longer working with the developer. There is also an issue of state aid approval. The point is that, even under ideal circumstances, it will take some time to resolve those issues, and the Government will need to take our time to consider the review and make a judgment in a proper and effective way.

As this important debate draws to a close, let me say that I expect a copy of the review’s report to be on my desk and those of colleagues very soon, and we will give it careful consideration. I assure hon. Members that the Government will strike the right balance between responding in a swift and timely way and taking the time required to consider this complex issue in the detail it deserves.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Mr Crabb, given that the Minister has been generous in giving up a bit of time, you have the opportunity to accept a bouquet and take a bow, but not much more, before I put the Question.

3.58 pm

Stephen Crabb: I will do that. First, thank you for your excellent chairmanship, Mr Paisley, which has facilitated this very good debate about not just the Swansea project—it was never about just the Swansea project—but the potential for a tidal lagoon industry for the whole of the United Kingdom. The sheer number of colleagues who participated from all parts of the United Kingdom and all parties demonstrates the overwhelming support for the Government to take forward a new tidal lagoon industry. I am reassured by the fact that the Minister said there will be no dragging of heels. He said that the Government will not support this project at any cost, but nobody was asking for them to support it at any cost. We have discussed some very reasonable figures and comparisons between different energy types.

This debate will carry on in other forums over the coming months. I hope we get a full, positive response and a decision from the Government, if not by the end of the year—perhaps it would be unreasonable to expect that—then certainly by the spring or summer.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered tidal lagoons and UK energy strategy.

Flood Re Insurance Scheme

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE in the Chair]

4 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the Flood Re insurance scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Hollobone. I am delighted to have the opportunity to move the motion.

Back in 2005, Carlisle was badly affected by floods, following which substantial investment was made in flood defences. By December 2015, the view was that Carlisle was probably safe from further floods and would not be affected. Exactly one year ago today, however, Storm Desmond struck the United Kingdom and in particular Cumbria. It was an extraordinary weather event, and the floods had a profound effect on our city.

For the record, the emergency services were absolutely brilliant. We must also recognise the contribution of individuals—friends, families, strangers—and communities. They all did a terrific job. I acknowledge, too, the contribution of Government. Central Government and local government rose equally to the challenge of the times, giving great support, manpower and assistance to the community.

To give one small example, the week after the floods I asked the then Chancellor at Prime Minister's questions if he would support the Cumbria Community Foundation. He indicated that he would match any funding raised. The foundation subsequently raised £5 million, which meant that, with the matched funding from central Government, £10 million was available, helping people enormously throughout Cumbria to recover from the floods. Work by the Environment Agency and the Cumbria Community Foundation is still going on, and people are gradually getting back into their homes. For the future, the Government have also committed a further £25 million to flood defences, which I am sure the EA will invest in and around Carlisle over the next few years.

What of the impact of Storm Desmond? From a Carlisle perspective—not even Cumbria, just Carlisle—more than 2,000 individual homes were directly affected. The knock-on impact on families, friends and the wider city was considerable. Furthermore, hundreds of businesses were affected, ranging from small, one or two-employee businesses to large factories such as McVittie's, which has more than 800 staff—I am delighted that it is back up in production now.

Nor should we forget the side effects of the floods on sporting facilities. Carlisle lost its tennis, rugby, squash, football, cricket, bowls and athletics facilities. The impact of that on the wider community is quite extraordinary. Furthermore, many people do not appreciate that three secondary schools were also affected. One of them has closed at its original site and is looking to move to a different location. The impact on Carlisle, its community, individuals, families, businesses, schools and social clubs, can therefore be appreciated. The effect was dramatic and is still ongoing.

It is important to set the scene for the Minister and explain what happened in Carlisle as a result of the floods then and subsequently. However, the purpose of today's debate is to address one particular aspect of flooding, namely Flood Re, which I will talk about from my perspective. A number of my colleagues are present today, and they will have their own views and issues to do with their own local communities, including the impact that Flood Re may or may not have had on individual households and the wider community.

For the record, Flood Re was an excellent bit of thinking by the Government and the insurance industry. Overall, it has been a great success. It took a number of years to get there; nevertheless, it was an inspired bit of thinking by the industry and Government, which reached a sensible compromise that has been hugely beneficial to many people up and down the country. The statistics are starting to tell the story about the number of people who managed to get insurance under the Flood Re regime.

An important thing from the Carlisle perspective was that the 2015 floods came, in many respects, unexpectedly—given what had happened in 2005 and the subsequent work on flood defences. At the time the community was badly affected and morale was low, but the one thing that gave people a little confidence was that through the Flood Re scheme they knew they could get insurance. That was vital for individuals and householders. I congratulate the Government and the insurance industry on Flood Re, because it is a job well done.

Therefore I am not here to be negative; I am here to be constructive. As with any new idea or piece of legislation passed by the House, however, sometimes issues can be overlooked, particular circumstances not taken into consideration, or judgment calls by the Government or the industry might need some adjustment or further thought. Perhaps the Government need to review the Flood Re regime and make some adjustment to it for the future.

I will concentrate on the specific issue of long leaseholders, although I accept that there are other issues with regards to leaseholds and so on. For example, there is what I call the accidental landlord—someone who for whatever reason, perhaps a job, might have to move to a different part of the country. Such people might not be able to sell their house, or they do not want to because they intend to move back to the area, so they lease the property out while purchasing or living elsewhere. That is clearly an issue, because they would not be able to get Flood Re insurance for the house they have vacated. That is a side issue for me, today in particular, but it is worth the Government looking at it.

I will concentrate on the long leaseholder. The purpose of Flood Re, as I understand it, is to help owner-occupiers—those who own their own principal private residence—not commercial owners. I fully understand the thinking about commercial owners, and in many respects I accept that.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. He is always a great champion of Carlisle and the north-west. May I make a point about non-commercial, community assets? On Boxing Day in my constituency, the village of Croston was badly flooded by Storm Eva, but Croston community centre is not eligible for assistance under the Flood Re scheme and it has been quoted excess of £35,000. The future of the centre, which of course was a hub of
activity in the floods, is now unviable. I know my hon. Friend is concentrating on long leaseholders, but does he have anything to say about that?

John Stevenson: I have some sympathy with what my hon. Friend says. In Carlisle, the sporting facilities were badly affected and they have ongoing issues with their insurance. She has raised a similar issue, which the Minister might wish to address when she sums up.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): My constituency, including several thousand homes and several thousand businesses, was also badly hit. Last weekend I met some residents of a block of 10 leasehold flats, next door to seven bungalows. The bungalows are eligible for Flood Re, but the 10 leasehold flats are not—one resident had bought a flat because they could not afford a bungalow. Does my hon. Friend agree that the £50,000 excess that each flat individually is being charged for flood insurance is excessive? Does he agree that Flood Re should be relooked at for that area of private residents?

John Stevenson: My hon. Friend is in many respects raising the very issue that I am about to deal with, so I obviously have a great deal of sympathy. Again, it will be interesting to hear what the Minister says about that point.

The real issue concerns long leaseholders who live in a property that is in effect their principal private residence—it is where they live, have their family and community, and so on. To all intents and purposes they are homeowners, but for a variety of legal and technical reasons they do not own the freehold—they are long leaseholders, but they do not own the freehold.

A group of long leaseholders will have a lessor, which is usually a management company. The management company owns the freehold and individuals take a lease on the property. Often the management company is in fact owned by the leaseholders. Leases may be for 999 years, and the freeholder is the management company, which would control it from there. They would be responsible for the communal areas, which could include grass cutting and roads, and may be responsible for parts of the fabric of the property, depending on the nature of the leasehold interests—whether it is a tenement flat going upwards or a group of properties next to each other. There will be variations, depending on the structure of the agreement at the outset. Interestingly enough, the landlord will be invariably responsible for ensuring that covenants between leaseholders are enforced to ensure that they comply with certain requirements under the terms of the leases.

It is interesting that the Flood Re legislation already allows for that set-up to a certain extent. It is allowed for properties of three flats, and three only. We could therefore have a situation where a landlord occupied one of the three properties—admittedly, they would have to live in one of them—and had another two on leasehold that are covered by Flood Re.

I will read from a letter from someone in the circumstances that I have raised. The freehold area is known as Willowbank, and he says:

“Willowbank is owned by a company, but that company is owned by the 29 leaseholders. The company has no income and no reserves. It makes no profit and pays no dividend. The two directors are paid neither a salary nor expenses.”

In many respects, Flood Re was there to help people like that. They are principal private occupiers who own their properties that are effectively freehold, but for whatever technical reason they are called leasehold and not covered by the legislation.

The legislation is meant to cover the whole of the United Kingdom, which includes Scotland, and in Scotland they have tenement blocks. As I understand it, the set-up under Scottish legislation is similar, but the tenement blocks, which are similar to the scenario I have set out, are covered by Flood Re legislation. I genuinely believe that it was not the intention of the legislation or of Parliament to exclude those I have described from Flood Re. I think the goal was to help secure the insurance requirements for people in those circumstances.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I want to come in on the positive aspects of Flood Re. Having grown up in Carlisle, I would also like to say that it was horrific and heartbreakingly obvious to see so much of the city knee deep or worse in water. I hope that most people have fully recovered.

More positively, Flood Re has made a real difference to many in my constituency, who have seen reduced premiums, reduced excesses and insurance made available when it was not before. Notwithstanding my hon. Friend’s reservations, will he commend the Government on taking such positive action and remind them that many businesses are still worried and in need of help?

John Stevenson: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. Flood Re has been a success. I have seen that in my constituency, where people now have confidence that their house will be insured. What I am trying to get at is a small group of people. In the setting I mentioned earlier, 29 houses were involved and in another scheme in Carlisle there are, I think, 68, but there will not be many other than those. I suspect that there will not be too many in such circumstances in the flood areas up and down the country, so most people will be able to get the appropriate cover, which, as she rightly says, is a positive.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. I, too, congratulate him on this important debate, which will be welcomed by his constituents and by everybody who has been seriously affected by flooding. Has he examined the proposal recently launched by the British Insurance Brokers Association that is intended for commercial properties and which I understand will also cover long lets? Is there not a danger, though, that because premiums are calculated on specifically targeted risk, they might end up as unaffordable for people in long-lease properties?

John Stevenson: The right hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. I am aware of the proposal with regards to commercial properties, which may be a way forward for them. I have concentrated on a narrow point with regards to the circumstances surrounding Flood Re.

To conclude, will the Minister bring forward a constructive review of Flood Re? Will she consult Flood Re and the insurance industry? Will she listen to the concerns of homeowners in my constituency who genuinely feel that they are being let down by the legislation and are unable to get that security and insurance for flood? It is an ongoing concern for them that if we get another
Storm Desmond, they will not necessarily have the money to refurbish their properties. I do not think that is the intention of the legislation. I hope the Minister will take on board the arguments that I have set out about the legislation and will acknowledge that there was an oversight, or that something was missed when it was considered, and that it would be appropriate to bring forward primary or secondary legislation to expand Flood Re to cover that small group. That would assist a small group of people in my constituency, but it would be hugely beneficial and give them confidence for the future.

4.16 pm

Dr Coffey: I would like to make some progress and then I will happily hear from my hon. Friend.

In the insurance industry, traditionally there has been an informal cross-subsidisation of the costs of flood risk, which is a common approach to managing risk in the insurance sector. However, commercial pressures and the availability of more sophisticated flood risk models have given rise to a trend towards insurers increasingly assessing local flood risk and imposing risk-reflective terms. Without Flood Re and with an immediate transition to fully risk-reflective prices in a free market, many households at high flood risk in the UK would probably experience a significant increase in their insurance premiums in the coming years. I therefore welcome the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant).

Tom Tugendhat: I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. As my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) elucidated, the Flood Re scheme has gone some way towards supporting communities, individuals and housing that is vulnerable to flood risk, but it is clear from the original legislation that it does not work in isolation. It works alongside flood defences not simply as a repair product but as part of a structure to build confidence in housing and industry in flood-affected areas. Will the Minister say a little about the flood protection the Government are introducing and how that will defend communities, particularly in areas such as the Medway?

Dr Coffey: I certainly hope to come on to that. To return to the genesis of Flood Re, the Government, working with the insurance industry, established the scheme to help householders at the highest flood risk who were blighted by not being able to access affordable insurance. It is expected to help about 350,000 households. Flood Re not only limits the price of flood insurance according to council tax band but limits the excess to £250. It ensures that all home insurers in the UK are part of the solution. It is a complex scheme, but it is a world-first and it is the fifth biggest reinsurance scheme globally and the second largest in Europe. There is much international interest in what we are doing.

Flood Re is providing relief for thousands of householders at flood risk and brings real practical and emotional comfort to many, as has been said. Fifty insurance companies, representing more than 90% of the market, now offer access and in its first six months of operation 53,000 households have benefited. This portfolio will build as the market matures, with Flood Re policies expected to grow in number over the next three years. I encourage hon. Members to advertise that to their constituents. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasising that a number of factors beyond flood risk determine any insurance quotation and it remains important for householders to shop around for the best deal.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I agree with the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) that the Flood Re scheme is a good one and has been successful, but does the Minister accept that there is more to do for businesses, particularly small businesses, in flooded areas such as York and Carlisle? When flooding hits, it has a huge impact on small businesses. Will she consider extending the scheme to cover businesses?

Dr Coffey: I intend to address that issue towards the end of my contribution. If I do not manage to do so in sufficient detail for my hon. Friend, I will be happy to have further discussions.

I stress that Flood Re is a transitional measure. It was designed with a 25-year lifetime to help householders at high flood risk to adapt to risk-reflective pricing. That sets the challenge of how collectively as a country we can bring down the risk and impact of flooding over the next 23 years. The Government are spending record amounts on flood defences, with a £2.5 billion six-year capital floods programme, which will provide better protection for at least 300,000 homes. My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) will be aware of some of the protections, and I know that he is pressing for more for his constituents.
There is a growing understanding that, regardless of our significant investment in flood defences, a residual risk of flooding remains. Flood defences are not always appropriate, and where they are we have seen that they can be overtopped in extreme events, as happened a year ago. We need to work across the whole catchment area to slow the flow of water through natural flood management and to prepare for any flooding that does occur. As well as ensuring we have a first-class emergency response to flood events, there is much we can do to adapt our homes and businesses to become more resilient.

Only last week, I visited Warrington and saw at first hand a new flood defence scheme at Victoria park where work is still in progress. Back in 2013 and within two weeks of the first phase being built, the scheme prevented 200 properties from being flooded. That was fantastic for the residents, but reminds me of the need to help people to understand the residual flood risk that inevitably remains. It is important to take measures to try to stop water entering a property and to speed recovery. Returning home is increasingly important and relatively simple steps can make a big difference—for example, flood resistant air-bricks; raising sockets; and using tiles instead of carpet. Property-level resilience can play a significant role in making people and their property less vulnerable to the physical and mental impacts of flooding.

A few months ago, we published the Bonfield property flood resilience action plan in collaboration with the commercial sector. It explores how collectively business and Government can best enable and encourage better uptake of such measures for properties, including businesses, at high flood risk.

Turning to leaseholds, particularly long leaseholds, I have commissioned my officials to look at the nature and extent of the problems that my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle described, as we need to look at them in more detail. He will be aware of the wider issue of small leasehold property, to which he referred. The insurance industry regularly informs us that for the most part, affordable commercial insurance and contents insurance for individual leaseholders is available through Flood Re, but there are examples of individuals and leasehold properties with more than three residential units struggling to access affordable business insurance. Likewise, there are examples of residential buy-to-let properties not being covered and owners finding it difficult to obtain insurance.

Evidence is building and the challenge is not easy. Much consideration was given during the creation of Flood Re to whether to include leasehold properties. From a practical perspective, insurers determine whether an individual property is at high flood risk on a household-by-household basis and can allocate the cost using a simple domestic insurance model. For leasehold properties, buildings insurance will often cover numerous dwellings, which may well have different levels of flood risk. It would be difficult to establish a consistently fair approach to how lessees should cover that risk.

There are also considerations of principle. With Flood Re, when the insurer has a direct relationship with the homeowner, the competitive market gives us confidence that the benefits provided by the scheme will reach the households for which it is intended. It is not clear that a similar scheme for leasehold properties would achieve this.

I have been saying for some time that there is good news. I am very pleased that yesterday the British Insurance Brokers Association announced the launch of a new commercial product designed to help small businesses at high flood risk to access affordable insurance. The scheme will also be open to leasehold properties. It will not doubt help some, and I hope it will help the vast majority of those who are struggling. On tenement housing in Scotland I was not aware of the difference in application, and I will certainly ask my officials to add to that. Should there prove to be a need for additional action, I remain open to exploring what can and should be done.

I have great sympathy with what my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) said and I am happy to explore it further. There is a similar challenge, in that that is not quite as straightforward as individuals’ domestic dwellings, but let us look at it and see.

Flood Re is not a panacea. There is no evidence of a systemic problem, but I recognise that there is a real problem for the individuals, businesses and communities involved. I am particularly concerned about smaller businesses that cannot easily move premises. I hope that using granular postcode data and recognising the benefit of property level resilience measures, the new products from insurers—as of next week, I believe—will enable more small businesses to obtain affordable insurance.

In parallel, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is working to understand the nature and extent of the problem. I thank the hon. Members who have shared examples with me and encourage businesses to work with us to help the Government to have a more comprehensive picture of the challenges that they face. Where there is a clear need for further action, the solutions are varied. Extending Flood Re to cover businesses is not possible, because the scheme is predicated on a domestic rather than commercial insurance model. Equally significant is the question of who pays to subsidise profit-making businesses, which are often more able to move premises than households.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle asked about Flood Re and the ongoing concern. Flood Re will be reviewed every five years. It needs to be given time to work, but there are separate policy questions that we need to look at with regard to scope. Flood Re will continue to interpret legislation and I assure hon. Members that we are in regular contact on it.

People should be aware that Flood Re does not extend to properties built during or after 2009. Planning law means that properties built in a high flood-risk area should already be resilient to flooding. Extending Flood Re to cover these properties would only incentivise unsuitable development. That is why we have not done that.

Mr Andrew Smith: Will the Minister, as part of her ongoing review, review the level of premiums that are charged under the British Insurance Brokers Association scheme in relation both to leasehold properties and to those of small businesses? The danger of a finely targeted, granular approach is that some may find the risk premium unaffordable.
Dr Coffey: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the principle of using taxation to support citizens is well established. The principle of forcing businesses to subsidise one another is not established and would be a significant difference.

The product is coming out formally next week and we need to see how it works. There are other models that will be encouraged and this might help the community centre to which my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle referred to think about adding extra insurance against the excess, if that excess is deemed to be too high to manage without additional protection.

I urge hon. Members to make sure that their constituents are aware of the Flood Re scheme and the benefits it can bring. I encourage hon. Members to make sure their constituents are flood aware and prepared for flood events. That could be signing up to the flood alert service and making properties more resilient. Touch wood, Mr Hollobone, I hope that we do not have an incident similar to Storm Desmond last year. However, we are not relying just on touching wood. I praise the Environment Agency for all its work in the last year, working alongside councils to make sure we are better prepared for this winter. I assure the House that this Government are committed to continuing to protect hundreds of thousands more homes in the coming years.

Question put and agreed to.
the most influential group across Europe. We are very proud of that. Sometime afterwards, I had the honour of being asked to form, with the backing of the World Bank, the Global Road Safety Partnership, which operated and still operates right across the world, trying to save—this is a desperate number—the 1.3 million people in the world who die every year on the roads. Yes, some countries have much less regulation than we do. In India and China particularly, the situation is tragic, as it is in South Africa. There are dreadful accidents, deaths and serious injuries in other countries, but today I want to concentrate on the UK.

As I have said, 1,730 people died on our roads last year. I think that we are becoming a little cosy and complacent about that number of deaths. I am not saying that we are becoming too complacent. I am looking at the Minister, who is a good friend of mine. He is a very good Minister, but I will nudge him today in a kindly way. Five people are killed every day in our country. That is five families destroyed. Ahead of today’s debate, I was inundated with emails and tweets, many of which were from bereaved families who had been torn apart by the actions of drunk, drugged or distracted drivers. That is the truth of the matter: the deaths are preventable.

All the time in this Parliament we are trying to get more Members engaged in reducing the casualties on their patch, bringing the figures down home. Every year, PACTS issues to every Member of Parliament—I hope that everyone can pick this up online or through PACTS—a dashboard showing what happens in their constituency, but it does not only show that: it shows how many deaths and how many serious accidents there have been, and we rate the constituency against other similar constituencies. That is a very useful tool. Someone cannot say, “I happen to live in a very dense urban area and the roads are terrible,” or “I live near a motorway.” All that is accounted for, so if someone’s constituency is well above the norm in this regard, they as the Member of Parliament should be out there campaigning with a coalition or partnership.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): On the subject of the dashboard and distracted drivers, has PACTS come to a view on the modern phenomenon of new cars having significant IT and entertainment systems—something a bit like an iPad—incorporated in the dashboard and what effect that innovation has had on the number of accidents?

Mr Sheerman: That is a brilliant intervention, because it is in the later part of my speech! It is true that the very sophisticated dashboard that some models of car now have, showing drivers not only how to park—self-parking—but all the hazards and all the different information that they can log into, is becoming an area of great concern, but the reason I have kept to a good, true and relatively sane path in transport safety is that I was converted by some of the best scientists in our universities and in the Transport Research Laboratory and other places to always remember: do not go for hearts and flowers; go for good science, good evidence, and what works in countries such as ours. I have always stuck to that, and it has guided me and my colleagues very well.

Understandably, there is an uprising of feeling when something dreadful happens, and recently we have seen some dreadful things—families being killed, mothers with children being killed, by distracted drivers. We know about that, but we have to bear it in mind that, overall, good science, good evidence, should be the watchword. I look at my friend the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry)—he is a friend on these matters particularly—and I say, “Let’s do the science. Let’s do the evaluation of the level of distraction caused by every innovation, including the new design of car interiors.” I think that that should be ongoing. I have not seen the results of research on that, but I know that it is a worrying area.

In Europe, 26,300 people died last year, and there was a slightly rising curve in our own country. I want now to mention the Twitter involvement in this debate. May I commend it, Mr Hollobone? What a wonderful innovation it is that now, when there is to be a Westminster Hall debate, we can involve the broader public by asking what they think about the debate we are to have on the following day. We had one for an hour yesterday. There was a lot of involvement and there were excellent ideas.

One of the top concerns for people was driver education. There is no doubt that young people are very vulnerable in the early years after they first learn to drive, when there are many accidents. There is evidence of young people not driving in the proper way and of that leading to pretty horrific casualties—the deaths and serious injuries of young people in their teens and early twenties.

My wife knows me extremely well—we have been married a very long time and have four children and 10 grandchildren; I do not know if that is a record among those in the Chamber, but I would not mind putting a bet on it—and always thought I had something of the Italian in my driving style, but I once amazed her by passing the test for the advanced driving certificate. I took the advanced drivers’ course possibly because I thought I was not a very good driver. A lot of evidence shows that good driving behaviour comes from good learning and good education early in a young person’s career. I talked to a chief constable in one of the coastal towns in which we used to have party conferences three or four years ago, and he said, “I am not so worried these days about young people having accidents; I am worried about elderly people who share with younger children a diminishing ability to judge distance and speed, and who drive very badly as they get older. There is no one in the family with the guts to say, ‘Mum, Dad—it’s time you stopped driving.’” We therefore need good training at the early age and at the later age, and to ensure that the Government do all that they can so that young people and older people are well educated on this life-and-death issue.

More than 200 tweets yesterday wanted distractions to be given a top priority. One of the largest distractions that people are talking about these days is mobile phones, and I absolutely agree that there should be that level of public interest. Yesterday there was the interest in the issue of drink and drugs, and we have had steady improvement. The Minister knows that I am concerned that there is still not an effective roadside test for alcohol, so that people do not have to take up so much police time by going to the police station for testing.
and so on. We have roadside testing for drugs but not for alcohol at the moment. However, there is no doubt that the real priority for the public is the distraction caused by mobile phones.

We see high-profile cases in which people who are distracted by their mobile phones cause dreadful accidents. I do not want to go into all the recent tragic cases, but many in this Chamber will know of the family killed by the lorry driver who was scrolling through songs on his phone. That was a terrible thing to have happened, and I can see why anyone who loses their lovely family, or members of their family, wants the strongest possible sentence available for that sort of behaviour. I have a lot of respect for that view, although it does sometimes lead people to look for a silver-bullet solution for the problems that we face. There is no silver bullet, but there is the evaluation of all accidents backed up by good evidence. Although I have sympathy with the idea of having stiff penalties for people who use their mobile phones or who drink or take drugs and drive, it will not save all those lives. It is more complicated than that.

There is also less public knowledge about the risk of drivers with poor eyesight. Road crashes due to poor driver vision are estimated to cause 2,900 casualties in the UK every year. I am not advertising Vision Express—my glasses are not from Vision Express, by the way—but its interesting survey found that 94% of people are unaware that vision can deteriorate by up to 40% before the driver starts to notice. Leaving drivers to self-report poor eyesight seems to Vision Express—I share this view—not to be a good idea. I certainly noticed as I got older that my vision, especially at dusk and when driving at night, was not as good as it should be. I recommend that we have tighter control on tests of good vision for drivers, certainly as they get older.

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): I want to intervene before the hon. Gentleman gives my entire speech. Does he agree that too few people really understand about making our roads safer, but I will ask the Minister about another thing that will upset him—that is, targets. For some reason, both the coalition and the present Governments believed that targets are not the sort of thing that they should have. They do not like them, and there is a kind of ideological resistance to them. However, all the research across the world—he knows I believe in research—shows that if we do not have targets for road casualty reduction, we do not get the reduction. We have to have a road casualty reduction programme. That is a very important point. I do not know of any leading expert, in or out of the Government, who honestly disagrees with that view. We need targets in order to get a reduction.

I was taken by the people who got involved with us on Twitter yesterday and said that we need to have that wonderful, but perhaps unrealistic, target of zero casualties and zero deaths on our roads. That is visionary and optimistic, but I know that targets work. We all know that we do not get casualty reduction in any country, or any part of a country, without a partnership and a team that have passion and leadership and care about this useless waste of life.

Mr Hollobone, you know that I am passionate about this issue. I know that not enough of our colleagues in the House of Commons are still interested enough in transport safety. It is a bit unfashionable and not sexy enough for some, but it is vital to the people that we represent.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I thought that my hon. Friend might be prorating towards a conclusion. [Interruption.] No, there is much more to come. I commend him for his passion and all his work over the years on this important subject. Will he say something about cyclists’ safety in particular? I am sure that a number of the tweets he mentioned would have referred to that. Does he agree that we all have an obligation, whether as cyclists or as motorists, to promote cycling safety? He referred to the Netherlands: do we not have a lot to learn from the success of its dedicated provision for cyclists in the interests of safety?

Mr Sheerman: My right hon. Friend makes a very fair point. I made a decision that I would not cover everything in this discussion but, yes, increasingly there are vulnerable road users including cyclists and pedestrians, both children and adults. There is also an increasing concern—I am sure the Minister is listening—about the number of really horrible, terrible, tragic accidents involving heavy goods vehicles. All the conferences and presentations I saw this summer mentioned the increasing relationship between horrible accidents in places such as London and HGVs. But, to be honest, I have to say—I am not a London MP, but a Yorkshire one—there has actually been more improvement in road safety standards and casualty reduction in London than in many places outside. We can get carried away by the passion and enthusiasm, but my message is that these are avoidable
[Mr Sheerman]

deaths, and we should use good science, good evidence and practical work done in other places to learn and improve.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate finishes at no later than 5.30 pm. The guideline speech limits for the three Front Benchers are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. That means that I need to call the Front Benchers no later than seven minutes past 5. It is now nine minutes to 5, which means that we basically have 15 minutes, and there are four people who want to speak. If hon. Members limit themselves voluntarily to four minutes, I will not have to impose a time limit. If you go over four minutes, somebody is not going to be able to speak. Rebecca Harris will show us how she can make all the points she wants to within four minutes.

4.51 pm

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): Thank you very much for calling me in this important debate, Mr Hollobone. As the Minister is well aware, I have been campaigning for a long time to raise awareness of the issue of drivers being medically fit to drive, particularly focusing on drivers having regular eye tests to prevent unnecessary casualties on our roads. I have been doing so ever since I met one of my constituents, Rev. Brenda Gutterlet, who told me the tragic story of her niece, Natalie, who, at the age of 28 and using a pedestrian crossing properly, was knocked down by a driver who knew he was unfit to drive because his eyes were too poor. He killed Natalie and she died on Valentine’s day 2006. Her death was entirely preventable and the family have been campaigning tirelessly ever since to try to make improvements.

There have been improvements—in particular, the introduction in 2013 of Cassie’s law, giving the police the power immediately to ban from driving anyone who fails a roadside test. The law was particularly welcome and I have seen it in action myself. I went out with my road safety reduction partnership in Essex, led by the superb Adam Pipe. I was in a car with a road safety traffic officer who pulled over a gentleman driving at 20 mph on a dual carriageway. When tested at the roadside, he failed the number plate test at five metres. He was a very nice elderly gentleman who did not realise how bad his eyesight was and reported to us that he had not has his eyes tested since he was in the Army. We were able to take his licence off him, get him home and refer him to get a prescription.

The nub of the matter is that there are people out there who do not appreciate how much their eyesight has deteriorated because the brain adjusts and they get used to it. They start saying, “Well, it’s a bit blurry, but I can kind of see and I am only doing local journeys.” We really need to get the message across to people who knowingly drive with poor eyesight and to those who, frankly, do not realise that they are driving with insufficient eyesight to be safely behind the wheel of a car.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) mentioned the statistics in recent research by Vision Express. It thinks that about 3,000 casualties a year are caused by poor eyesight, but it is hard to know because they are not all recorded and it is not always obvious that they were due to poor eyesight, so there could be many more. We need statistics, but we also need to ensure that drivers understand their responsibility, particularly when they get to about 40 and their sight problems start to fall off the edge of a cliff. An awful lot of people simply have not had their eyes tested since they took their driving test, which was, on average, 15 or so years ago, and for many a great deal longer.

To be honest, I am not calling for compulsory sight testing. I do not think we necessarily need to legislate, but we could do things such as using electronic motorway displays to remind people of the need to take tests, as Brake and Vision Express have been calling for. They would like to see gantry signs saying, “Eye tests save lives.” Perhaps we could also do something like asking people, when they renew their licence, not just, “Are you fit to drive?”—that is easy to tick and say yes to—but, “Have you had an eye test within the last couple of years?” It is much harder for someone to prove that they have had an eye test.

We take our cars for an MOT every year to ensure they are roadworthy. Why should we not do the same thing for our eyes, which are equally important when it comes to driving? Many opticians offer free tests and many groups are eligible for them. Even if people are not eligible for a free test, the cost of an eye test is considerably less than the cost of a full tank of petrol. The cost of even the most expensive prescription is a fraction of what it costs for the privilege of staying on the road. I call for more awareness of the need for eye testing. I would very much like to ensure that it is a necessity for people’s sight to be sufficient for them to be fit to be behind the wheel, and for driving with poor eyesight to be as socially unacceptable as drink and drug-driving is today.

4.55 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on introducing this important subject and speaking so passionately about it more than 35 years down the road, for want of a pun.

It is amazing that the number of road accident fatalities today is roughly a quarter of the number in the 1920s and 1930s when there were far fewer cars on the road. That is testament to the improvements in vehicle design, road engineering and driver behaviour, including attitudes towards drink-driving and wearing seatbelts. I commend the hon. Member for Huddersfield for outlining the passionate campaign and the hard work that went into making seatbelts compulsory. It is amazing to think that that was resisted so much within Parliament as it is accepted as normal behaviour now.

It is welcome that the UK has the third lowest accident fatality rate among OECD member states, and there has been a recent decrease in the number of fatalities compared with 2014 but, as we have heard, 1,730 deaths still mean 1,730 families getting a tap at the door. To that end, I was happy to serve today on a Delegated Legislation Committee that agreed to double the penalty points for the use of mobile phones when driving, but I was a bit disappointed by the response from the Minister when I challenged him on the drink-driving limits over which the UK Government preside. He reverted to the
figures show that Portsmouth has by far the worst
said, bad cycling habits make it a much more dangerous
but our congested roads, poor driving and, it must be
is a compact, flat city, and it should be a cyclist’s dream,
of injuries each year in Portsmouth. The trend is
death or serious injury. Those are issues of vital concern
of a consultation on sentencing for those who cause
weeks ago. The debate is also timely, with the announcement
work over the years, which is good to see.
(Mr Sheerman) for his passionate speech and for all his
is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship,
2.7 million horse riders in this country—I
Road safety is everyone’s business and, as we have
in serious need of investment—I am not shy about
Barrie: It is a simple fact that alcohol impairs judgment and
while driving as it is to drink and drive.
I hope the Government’s progress on the cycling and
walking strategy will continue, but it must be backed up
by investment if my constituents are to feel safe on the
streets. I am concerned that there may be some drift on
the strategy as financial pressures change, and I look forward to hearing confirmation that cycling safety is
still a Government priority.
I welcome the consultation on sentencing for dangerous
and careless driving, because one of the biggest causes
of public concern is that drivers can kill, wrecking the
lives of victims and their families, but end up with
sentences that feel like neither a punishment nor a
deterrent. Although the number of deaths in accidents
has fallen dramatically, we should recognise that that is
largely down to the improved safety features built into
modern vehicles and that driver behaviour has not
necessarily improved at quite the same rate.
Far too often, we hear of people being killed or
seriously injured by drivers distracted by mobile devices.
Our always-online society can tempt drivers to fiddle
with gadgets while they drive but, as we have seen
recently, the consequences can be lethal. Although we
have not recently had a fatality in Portsmouth because
of such distractions, the risk is apparent to anyone
standing on a busy road. It is not good enough for
drivers to argue that they are stationary in a jam or in
slow-moving traffic in a city centre. If they are not
concentrating on what is happening around them, they
are a danger to everyone.
The action that has been taken legally and socially
against drink-driving has gradually driven down the
incidence of such offences. In 1979, 1,600 people were
killed in drink-driving accidents; by 2014, the figure
had been reduced to 240. That is still 240 too many, but
it is a good example of what can be done with determined
enforcement and social pressure. We need to make it
just as socially unacceptable to use a mobile phone
while driving as it is to drink and drive.
In the long term, I would like us all to move to more
sustainable modes of transport, because that is the best
way to improve road safety. In modern cities, the use of
diesel and petrol vehicles to get around is becoming
unsustainable because of the hazards it imposes, the
threat of pollution, the difficulty of parking and the
gridlock caused by the sheer weight of traffic. Those
are all particular threats in Portsmouth, a densely populated
area with poor road access and public transport that is
in serious need of investment—I am not shy about
lobbying Ministers on that. In an urban environment, a
change in travelling behaviour will get people from A to B
quicker than sitting in a car.
Road safety is everyone’s business and, as we have
seen in our efforts to address the drink-drive menace, it
is important that social pressure against bad habits is
constant and backed up by Government action.

5.3 pm
Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): I
congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield
(Mr Sheerman) on securing this hugely important debate.
There are 2.7 million horse riders in this country—I
am occasionally one of them—and 1.3 million ride
regularly on our roads. Back in 2010, the British Horse
Society launched a website so that horse riders who
regularly use the roads can record accidents. Since the
website was launched just six years ago, there have been
2,374 reported incidents involving horses coming into contact with cars on the road. Thirty-eight riders have been killed, and well over 200 horses have been killed by vehicles or euthanised at the roadside.

Riders coming into contact with other road users, particularly those driving cars, is an issue because there is no proper education system to teach learner drivers how to pass horses. The British Horse Society launched its “dead slow” campaign earlier this year, and it is about educating drivers so they know not to pass a horse, either with a rider or drawing a vehicle, at more than 15 miles an hour and to give at least one car’s width. In this debate on preventing road traffic accidents, I hope the Government will consider what they can do to educate learner drivers and other road users on the dangers of passing a horse.

Horses are flight animals, so when they panic, such as when a vehicle passes too close, their first reaction is to run away. They then often come into contact with such vehicles, doing a lot of damage to the vehicle, to the horse rider and to the horse. As we have heard, 200 horses and 38 riders have been lost. This issue was brought to my attention by a constituent, Joanne Heys, who fell off her horse in November 2015 and suffered severe injuries—the horse suffered injuries, too—on a stretch of road between Bolton and Blackburn. The road is a bit of a hotspot for horse riders because it links two of our main bridle paths. We have run a campaign in Tockholes to ensure that local road users in east Lancashire are aware of our huge network of bridleways, many of which intersect with main roads. Horse riders do not want to go on the roads—they want to be on bridleways—but they often come into contact with lorries, heavy goods vehicles and other road users. I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity in his summation to say a bit more about what the Government can do to consider further protections and education for horse riders.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield said that this debate is no longer sexy. Well, those of us who remember that wonderful film “Notting Hill” will remember that the sexy Hugh Grant claimed to work for Horse & Hound as he interviewed the beautiful actress with whom he was trying to start a relationship, so I thought I would quote my own appearance in Horse & Hound which may be regarded as sexy, but not as sexy as Hugh Grant. This is from 18 November, and I am sure copies are available in the Library:

“I want people to have horse safety in their mind when they get in their car in East Lancashire.”

And, for that matter, in every other part of our country.

5.7 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on securing this important debate. My only regret is that we do not have more time to discuss these issues today—obviously that is no fault of anyone here. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the human tragedy and the fact that we must work towards no lives being lost—a zero target. No one would disagree with his comprehensive review of what needs to be undertaken.

The hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) mentioned the importance of eye tests. When people go for an eye test, they get a subsequent reminder. Everyone should get involved so that they can keep their eyesight up to scratch for driving. The hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) spoke about how horses can go into flight and the additional damage that this can cause. These are all important issues, and we all agree that road safety should concern us all, regardless of party colour or of where we live, work and do our business.

The Scottish Government are committed to addressing the public health issue of road traffic accidents, and they go further than the UK Government on measures to curb drink-driving and to promote safe cycling and active transport. The SNP Scottish Government have taken a wide range of actions to reduce traffic accidents in Scotland, including cutting the blood alcohol limit. We welcome figures showing a decrease in road accident injuries in 2015 in Scotland. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) mentioned that in December 2014 the Scottish Government cut the limit from 80 mg per 100 ml to 50 mg per 100 ml, which is lower than the rest of the UK. There has been a reduction in drink-driving compared with the previous year. England, Wales and Northern Ireland still have the 80 mg limit, which is the joint highest in Europe. We are disappointed that the UK Government are not following suit. I look forward to hearing how the Minister will proceed.

My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) mentioned mobile phone use at the wheel. The SNP has backed the UK Government in doubling fines for drivers who use mobiles while driving, and we call on the UK Government to take further action to prevent accidents. We welcome figures in Scotland showing a decrease in road accident injuries in 2015. More than £250 million is spent annually in Scotland on the maintenance and safe operation of the trunk road network. In 2014, road death figures were 31% lower than the 2004 to 2008 baseline, but, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield said, we know that one fatality is too many. We are pleased that casualties in Scotland have fallen to their lowest number since records began. Car casualties fell by 1.1%, pedestrian casualties by 3.4%, motorcycle casualties by 11.4% and cyclist casualties by 11.1%.

We are investing in public and sustainable transport, because we know that it can be effective in reducing road traffic accidents. As the hon. Member for Portsmouth South mentioned, it is an important subject. On 2 November 2016, the Scottish Transport Minister, Humza Yousaf, announced plans for a cycling taskforce whose main aim will be to drive forward ambitious cycling infrastructure, such as segregated cycle paths and Community Links Plus. By the end of this financial year, the Scottish Government will have spent more than £8.2 billion to improve safety on Scotland’s motorway and trunk road network, including the £3 billion upgrade of the notorious A9 in my constituency to dual carriageway status. Safety cameras, which have been deployed for the past couple of years, have reduced deaths and serious accidents dramatically from previous figures. There are lessons to be learned, and I hope that the Minister will take that into account.
Finally, on safety, many people are unaware that they are committing an offence by driving with expired MOT certificates. There is currently no automatic reminder for MOTs like the one for tax discs, for example. As a result, people drive vehicles that they may be unaware are unsafe, and they may also be committing a road traffic offence. The onus should always be on them, but I am pleased to see that an idea I put to the motor insurance industry has been picked up by Aviva insurance, which I am told will issue reminders about MOT expiry dates to its customers as of next year.

5.12 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on securing this debate. I pay tribute to the several decades that he has committed to the campaign. While he was doing so in this place, I was on the outside looking after the families of those who had been bereaved and injured. We share that passion. This debate is particularly apposite given that we have just had road safety week.

As we have heard, the UK has a proud record of some of the safest roads in the world—I pay tribute to the work of RoadPeace, Brake and other charities committed to the cause—but of late, we have hit a standstill. Sadly, over the past three years, the number of deaths on our roads has increased; the Department for Transport estimates that there were 710,000 road casualties last year alone. The Government say that road safety is a top priority, but so far their legacy has been one of disappointment and frustration. In the last Parliament, they scrapped the road targets introduced by Labour, which successfully reduced by one third the number of those killed or seriously injured. Some argue that targets do not achieve anything, but I disagree: they focus minds and attention and hold the Government accountable.

Sadly, the Government are also failing on enforcement. A majority of police forces have recorded year-on-year falls in full-time road policing officers. There were 1,437 fewer designated officers outside London in 2015 than there were in 2010. I am sure that the Minister will take heed of this year’s road safety week campaign, which centred on the important six-point pledge that everyone here will have signed, as I did. The pledge committed both drivers and other road users to the importance of slower, sober, secure, silent, sharp and sustainable driving. We need the Government to act in all those areas.

Serious questions remain about drink and drug driving. Since 2010, progress has ground to a halt, with no reduction in the number of road traffic collisions involving drink-driving. Each year, it causes around 240 deaths. Over half of those are not the drunk drivers but passengers or other road users in the wrong place at the wrong time. We welcome the Christmas advertising campaign, but what else is being done? What discussions has the Minister had with police and crime commissioners about existing limits and enforcement?

Alan Brown: What is the hon. Gentleman’s position on the call to reduce the drink-driving limit?

Andy McDonald: We take seriously the success in Scotland, and we want that evidence base to inform us. That is exactly the right direction to be going in, but let us see the evidence rolled out. I am sure that the Minister will wish to comment on that as well. Sadly, the Government seem oblivious to the impact of their substantial cuts to road police numbers. It is worrying that a majority of forces have recorded year-on-year falls in the number of full-time road policing officers.

Many of us will have seen the consequences of mobile phone use by drivers, such as the terrible crash that killed Tracy Houghton and her children. Department for Transport figures show that in 2015, drivers impaired or distracted by their phones were a contributory factor in 440 road accidents in Britain. Although we welcome this morning’s statutory instrument increasing the number of points on a driving licence for mobile phone use, once again it is not possible to police the issue if there are no police present to enforce the law. We cannot leave that work to tabloid newspaper photographers whose campaigning we have seen in recent weeks. The Government must take the initiative and invest in roadside policing, not cut it, so that accidents can be prevented and lives saved.

When accidents do occur on our roads, it is crucial that the vehicles involved have been designed to be as safe as possible. Given that 90% of road accidents are caused by human error, the introduction of autonomous vehicles on our roads in the not-too-distant future could be an opportunity to transform road safety.

In closing, I note that the Government stated in their manifesto that they would reduce the number of cyclists and other road users killed on our roads every year. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to the genuine concerns about police numbers, enforcement, penalties and awareness. Without action, it is projected that a third of a million people will be killed or seriously injured on the roads in Britain over the two decades ending in 2030.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Minister can bring his remarks to a conclusion no later than 5.27 pm, he will give time for Mr Sheerman to respond.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I will have to go at quite some pace to respond to all the points made. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), whose long and distinguished record of campaigning on this issue speaks for itself. It is impressive. This issue is a priority for all of us here; it is certainly a priority for me and the Government. We have a good record by international standards, but that does not mean that we should not work harder to go further. He mentioned the devastation that a knock on the door can bring to a family, as it was brought to 1,770 families last year. I never forget that behind each statistic is a shattered family. It spurs me on, as I am sure it spurs on all of us.

To make improvements, we need to draw on the best evidence and analysis available so that our efforts can be targeted where we can make the biggest impact in reducing road deaths and injuries. I welcome and strongly support the excellent work being done by Highways England, which is leading the way in adopting and championing a safe systems approach. It is absolutely essential that our strategic road network is as safe as possible, given that it carries such an astonishing amount
of traffic. Equally important is improving safety standards for the rest of our road network. In the last few days we have published an assessment of local authorities' most improved roads, and I congratulate all those who have made the biggest improvements.

Since I took responsibility for the road safety brief last May, one statistic has struck me vividly: 60% of road deaths take place on country roads. That proportion rises to 80% for young drivers, so it is crucial that we do more to improve the safety of our country roads. In October, we relaunched the THINK! country roads campaign, which is aimed at getting motorists, particularly younger males, to slow down, be more vigilant and brake before reaching bends rather than at them. Last year's campaign was successful in changing behaviour and raising awareness of the unexpected hazards that can be found in rural areas.

I am pleased to be supporting the Road Safety Foundation and the Royal Automobile Club Foundation in their forthcoming work with local authorities to identify safety problems through the star rating approach, and to identify cost-effective solutions for the most high-risk roads. I hope that work can provide a model for wider adoption by local authorities.

I want to go further in investigating what more my Department can do to offer tangible support to those areas with the most dangerous roads. In the autumn statement on 23 November, more investment in roads was announced, including £1.3 billion to help to support infrastructure projects, with £1.1 billion for the local road network and £220 million for the strategic road network. Of that £1.1 billion for the local network, £175 million will be spent on upgrading the 50 highest-risk local roads. That targeted intervention will go on the engineering side. We know that there is human error, but if we can use the engineering of a road network to ensure that an accident or crash is less significant, that will be a great bit of progress.

We published our road safety statement in December last year, and I would like to update the House on the hard work we are doing to carry out its priorities. Drug-driving has been a growing problem. We have provided £1 million to police forces in England and Wales to support drug-driving enforcement. As a result, nearly 5,000 drug-drivers were convicted in the first eight months of this year, compared with just 879 in the whole of 2014. In March, we launched a THINK! campaign to educate people on the dangers of drug-driving and to send a clear message that it is unacceptable and that the consequences of doing it are very serious. Figures show that a fifth of convicted drug-drivers have previously been banned for drink-driving, so just last month I announced the launch of a new pilot impairment course, with drug-driving education being added to the existing drink-drive offenders courses in England and Wales. Around 1,000 drink-drive offenders will participate in the pilot courses and we will consult on the results next year.

Lots of colleagues mentioned mobile phones. We have consulted on increasing the penalties for those who drive while using a handheld mobile phone. In line with the view of the majority of the more than 4,000 people who responded to the consultation, we are going further than the original proposals. Only this morning an order was approved for higher penalties for people using their mobile phones while driving, whether they are texting, calling or using an app. In future, motorists will receive a fixed penalty notice of six penalty points plus a £200 fine. That is a significant change that will make a difference. Once Parliament has approved the order—it has to go to the upper House next—we expect the new regime to take effect on 1 March next year.

Handheld mobile phone use was a contributory factor in 22 fatal crashes in 2015, each one of which was a needless tragedy. We must bring that number down. One of the most challenging parts of my role is meeting some of the devastated families whose loved one has been killed by someone using a mobile phone while driving. Such families are obviously incredibly upset and angry—there is a sense of frustration, which leads to anger that they have lost a loved one because of something that could have been prevented so easily. Drivers of large goods vehicles and passenger service vehicles who commit the offence will continue to face the traffic commissioners, who regulate their conduct and have the power to review and suspend their vocational licence entitlement to drive such vehicles. Given the damage that can be done, that is proportionate; we are all aware of cases that have made the news.

When the law changes, we will be supporting it with a THINK! campaign to leave people in no doubt at all of the seriousness of the issue. It is appropriate to view this as going in the same social direction as we have managed to go in with drink-driving. We want it to be as socially unacceptable to use a mobile phone while driving as it is to drink and drive.

Several colleagues have mentioned some of the things we can do to ensure that new drivers can take the freedoms of the road equipped with the skills and knowledge to be safe. We are piloting a new driving test to reflect today's driving conditions. It will include longer periods of independent driving, more realistic manoeuvres and a requirement for the driver to follow directions from a sat-nav. It is basically about improving the driver's road awareness when they get the freedom ticket that a driving licence can provide.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) asked whether cycling safety was still a priority. Yes, it is. The Bikeability scheme is secure, and we will be training 1 million children through it. My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) asked about horse awareness. We have supported the British Horse Society's campaign and look forward to working with it more in future because I do recognise the problem. I held a meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) and her constituent on the issue she raised, as a result of which the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency amended the licence renewal form to encourage older drivers to get their eyesight checked.

There are currently no plans to change the drink-drive limit. The key priority for us is to target those who are causing drink-driving problems, and they are not in the 50 mg to 80 mg per 100 ml category; they are in the 140 mg to 150 mg category, because that is the average blood alcohol content of people arrested for drink-driving. It is no good targeting a small group but missing the elephant in the room, which is what would happen if the legislation was changed. We have no reason to
introduce targets; I do not need a target to tell me that this issue is a priority and to feel spurred on to take more action.

We want to make our roads as safe as we can. We are building on the good work of campaigners throughout the country over many years and on the work delivered by Governments of all colours. We have a good record and plans to improve on that further. It is through targeted interventions in the most difficult areas that we will make the progress we need.

5.27 pm

Mr Sheerman: Thank you so much, Mr Hollobone, for letting me sum up the debate. I shall say only a few things. I have the greatest respect for the Minister and will continue to nudge him on targets, because the Scots have it right on alcohol. There is a worrying upward trend in women drink-drivers that we should all be aware of.

I want to finish with a bit more passion. The research into transport safety has declined over the years. Internationally, university research is not as strong as it used to be, so we have to be careful about the quality of research available worldwide. Local councils also now have much less money for road safety matters. There are some really great individuals, such as Michael Woodford, who are very interested in road safety, as is the UN now.

There is increasing interest in the Inter-Parliamentary Union and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association helping us to educate other parliamentarians about what can be achieved in places like China and India. We should be making the CPA and IPU into something useful. They should not be about just going there and shaking hands and smiling at people—I have been on those trips. Let us make them more positive. We should be corresponding with those parliamentarians and saying, “This is what we’ve done in the UK. Can we help you to do something similar?”

The fact is that if someone does not have a passion for this rather unusual subject, they should not be in Parliament, because it is about our constituents and families. Let us get more people involved in pacts and in the campaign, and let us make sure that Britain is a safer place to ride on horses, on bicycles, on motorcycles and in cars. Most of all, let us make sure it is safer for families enjoying themselves and for those getting to work.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered road traffic accident prevention.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 7 December 2016

[Mr Peter Bone in the Chair]

Tree Planting

9.30 am

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered tree planting in the UK.

I have a declaration of interest to make: the forest and wood-processing sectors are well represented in my constituency, which contains no fewer than three sawmills, including one at Newbridge-on-Wye, close to the ground of the famous Royal Welsh show at Builth Wells. It will come as no surprise that forestry has always been a strong interest of mine, and I was delighted to be selected by Members to chair the all-party parliamentary group on forestry soon after I was elected as a Member of Parliament. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Unanimous support, as you can tell, Mr Bone.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): There was only one nomination.

Chris Davies: I will ignore that. The timing of this debate is fortuitous, coming as it does just after National Tree Week, which ended on Sunday. National Tree Week is the UK’s largest annual tree celebration, launching the start of the winter tree-planting season. It first took place in 1975.

The debate also coincides with the inquiry into forestry in England by the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which took evidence from a number of organisations interested in trees and woodlands yesterday. It is heartening to see that Parliament is taking the issue of tree planting seriously. This debate is part of the important process of looking at the issue carefully throughout all the nations that make up the United Kingdom, so we can see what lessons can be learned and shared.

The first question to ask is, why does tree planting matter to the people of the UK? Secondly, if it does matter, are we planting enough trees? Thirdly, if we are not planting enough trees, how can we change that and plant more? I will discuss the three questions in the order I set them out.

First, why does planting trees matter? There are many reasons. Most people are surprised when they are told that the UK is the third largest net importer of wood products in the world. China, with its population of 1.35 billion, tops the league table, and Japan, with a population double that of the UK, is in second place.

The reason for our reliance on imports is simple. Woodland cover in England is only 10%, and about 40% of that is not actively managed. Our good friends in Scotland, however, are taking the lead among the home nations with woodland cover at 18%, but that is still only half the European average of 37%. The days of comparing ourselves against the great European averages as a benchmark may be drawing to a close, but it is worth reflecting that more than 30% of the land of all our large European neighbours—Germany, France, Italy and Spain—is covered by trees.

The World Wide Fund for Nature has calculated that global demand for timber, paper and energy from forests is set to triple by 2050. If we do not plant more trees now, and if we continue to rely on imports, then the UK will be competing against other growing economies for a natural resource that we can, and perhaps should, grow more of at home.

What do the British public think? Helpfully, the Forestry Commission has conducted twice-yearly surveys of public attitudes to forestry and related issues since 1995. The findings are consistent over time and are worth putting on the record. Three quarters of people agree or strongly agree that

“Trees are good because they remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and store it in wood”.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Rowlinson Timber in my constituency uses forestry products and imports many of them. Making products that go into the supply chain locks up the carbon for additional time and allows the wood to be recycled at the end of the product’s life, making a vital contribution to ecosystem services. Furthermore, planting new trees also assists with anti-flooding measures.

Chris Davies: My hon. Friend makes two good points, which I will elaborate on as we make progress. Indeed, in the survey, two thirds of the public agree or strongly agree that:

“Planting more trees can help us cope with climate change by providing shade and reducing the effects of flooding”,

as my hon. Friend said. Four fifths agree or strongly agree that

“A lot more trees should be planted”.

I repeat that for the benefit of the Minister: four fifths of the public agree or strongly agree that a lot more trees should be planted.

Does tree planting matter to the people of the UK? The evidence I have just given strongly demonstrates that it does, and evidence does not come only from more than 20 years of opinion polling. The British public are right behind great charities that support tree planting, such as the Woodland Trust, Trees for Life and the John Muir Trust. Last week, an editorial in The Guardian—not my paper of choice, as has been pointed out to me—summed up our attitude to trees well:

“The British like to romanticise trees”,

it said, having earlier stated:

“We need greenery to feed the forests of our imaginations.”

I find it hard to disagree with those views.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Even in The Guardian.

Chris Davies: Even in The Guardian.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has recognised the role of trees in mitigating flooding as part of natural flood management, and the EFRA Secretary of State recently announced a £19 million fund to plant trees, because of their contribution to locking up carbon. There are therefore many reasons
why we should plant trees. Most importantly, perhaps, our constituents are overwhelmingly in favour of more trees being planted.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the issue is about trees in not only in rural areas, but urban areas? Many people enjoy the presence of trees in towns, and they also act as green lungs—things that are physically beautiful, but also contribute to a better environment for all.

Chris Davies: I represent a rural seat, so I am looking from the perspective of the rural economy—and, indeed, of how trees enhance rurality—but I fully agree with my hon. Friend. I chose my little shoebox of a flat in London because it is close to an open square, so that I look out over a little patch of green grass and trees, which reminds me of home. My hon. Friend makes an important point: that certainly puts a spring in my step as I come into this great place every morning.

There are many reasons to plant trees, not least the wishes of our constituents, so I now come to the second question that I asked. Are we planting enough trees in the UK? The answer, as people will not be surprised to learn, sadly, is no. Planting rates in England are at a modern low and have been described as woeful.

The forestry industry in the UK supports at least 79,000 low-carbon jobs and is worth nearly £2 billion annually to our economy. Industry body Confor, the Confederation of Forest Industries, believes that such figures could be significant underestimates. Most available statistics from our countries are out of date, although a recent study in Scotland pointed the way, showing that the sector there had grown by 50% between 2008 and 2014, during challenging economic times in the UK. Well done to Scotland!

In the UK as a whole, we are benefiting from relatively high levels of tree planting in the decades after the end of the second world war. Trees planted in the 1970s and ’80s are now available for harvesting, which is contributing directly to a boom in the forestry and wood-processing industries. Unfortunately, new planting rates in the UK fell dramatically at the end of the 1980s. There has been an increase in Scotland in recent years, but other countries of the UK have largely followed a downward trend.

Organisations such as Confor and the Woodland Trust have been warning about this downturn in planting and the effect that it will have over a number of years. The language used has, perhaps understandably, become more and more extreme. Confor highlights the threat to future supplies of wood to support businesses in the UK, while the Woodland Trust has wondered whether England has experienced annual deforestation in recent years. The situation is simply not acceptable.

I come to my final point, which is a simple question: how can the UK change our approach to tree planting and ensure that we plant more trees? There is some evidence that comprehensive safeguards are in place to ensure value for money and that high standards are followed, particularly for forestry. However, the relevant bodies across the UK should be able to approve larger schemes that fully meet UK forestry standard requirements within six months in most cases and a year in all cases, not the current two years-plus. That would provide reassurance to farmers and landowners that their applications will not get bogged down with continually rising costs.

We all know that the UK will have to look again at support for the countryside after the country leaves the European Union. We do not yet know what the level of support will be or what it will look like. That will be determined by not just the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but the devolved Administrations in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. We surely must grasp the opportunity in front of us to ensure that forestry has parity of esteem with farming and fisheries as post-Brexit countryside policy develops.

For too long, forestry has been the forgotten F-word in rural policy and a poor relation in land use policy discussions. If we grow and process more of the wood we need in the UK, jobs will stay in this country, rather than being exported overseas. Using wood grown in Britain is clearly a priority for this Government, and I firmly support that. Leaving the EU means that we can look again at public procurement rules. States in countries such as Canada and Australia have timber-first public procurement policies. Using more sustainable UK-grown timber will stimulate business growth and ensure that more of our woodlands are well managed.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate, and I apologise for missing the very start. He was good enough earlier to touch on the fact that Scotland leads the way on forestry planting. On the use of wood in the UK, does he agree that the UK Government should look again at public procurement rules? States in countries such as Canada and Australia have timber-first public procurement policies. Using more sustainable UK-grown timber will stimulate business growth and ensure that more of our woodlands are well managed.

Chris Davies: The hon. Gentleman takes advantage of my praise for Scotland, but I certainly agree with him on that matter, which I am sure the Minister will elaborate on.

The Chancellor’s autumn statement made clear the need for new homes across the UK. Using timber means that houses can be built to a high standard, more quickly and with less energy in construction, and it saves money over the lifetime of the property. The UK sawmilling sector, which is a large employer in my constituency, and the wood paneling sector process nearly all the 11 million tonnes of UK-grown timber that is harvested annually.

The sawmilling sector has invested £100 million in UK plants every year since the recession. UK timber has a wide variety of domestic and construction uses—it is used in building our homes, for decking, fencing and pallets for industry, and much more. Mills such as BSW
in my constituency and around the country are among the most modern and efficient in Europe. We have much to be proud of. I look forward to hearing the views of other Members from around the country, because we all have an interest in forestry and planting trees.

My view might be best summarised by an adaptation of the famous 18th-century Dunning’s motion, which was passed by the House of Commons: tree planting in the UK has decreased, is decreasing and ought to be increasing. I urge Members to support that approach. I hope that all political parties and devolved Governments across the UK will work together to address the long-term decline in tree planting.

Antoinette Sandbach: Does my hon. Friend agree that in Wales, the incorporation of the Forestry Commission into Natural Resources Wales has been a disaster? That has had a dramatic effect on the perception of forestry as the missing F-word in policy.

Chris Davies: I understand that this debate is not particularly about Wales and NRW, and the Minister will probably keep off that subject, but I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. As a Welsh MP and someone who was involved in Forestry Commission Wales, I have been a great supporter of it in years gone by. Forestry has virtually disappeared into NRW. In my opinion—in hers too, I am sure—that is a tremendous mistake. Forestry Commission Wales was a beacon to look up to; now, as she says, forestry is the missing F-word. That is a great shame indeed.

Alex Chalk: Does my hon. Friend agree that in this debate we need to look at quality as well as quantity? We ought to look to preserve the diversity and richness of domestic deciduous species, not just rush to plant any old evergreen species.

Chris Davies: I agree that this country needs more trees. We have to be sensible and look at the end product. We encourage farmers and landowners to plant trees, and they have to look at the return. The Government have to ensure that there is the right return and help for planting, processing and managing. We have to look at the evergreens—the softwoods—that can produce a reasonable return in 40 to 50 years; hardwood trees produce a return in 80 to 100 years.

There must be a place for both kinds of trees, but the sawmills in my constituency, which I have mentioned many times, require softwood. They employ 150 people—that will go up to 180 in the next 12 months—and they process softwood. We require a great deal of softwood in this country. As I have already stated, all the wood that we produce, the majority of which is softwood, is consumed in this country, and we import even more. We have to look at not just what makes the countryside pretty and what looks after its ecology but what our subsidiary industries require. So I agree in part.

I hope that all the devolved Governments and the Westminster Government will work closely to plant more trees, which would make such a difference to our economy, our environment and our communities. Significant new tree planting would provide solutions to a whole range of 21st-century problems. It would deliver jobs and investment to our rural areas, help to reduce the impact of climate change and flooding, create habitats for wildlife and wonderful places for people to enjoy, and provide the raw material to build the new homes that this country needs.

9.48 am

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): It is nice to appear under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on securing this important debate and on his excellent opening speech. Unusually, most of us probably agree with most of what he said—especially his congratulations to the Scottish National party Government in Scotland for their record on tree planting.

Much of the hon. Gentleman’s speech was about the economics of forestry, and I will talk a little about that, but I also note the importance of tree planting for all of us—it is not just about economics. Woods and forests are magical places that give joy to millions and have deep roots in our culture and folklore, yet the UK’s woodland resources have declined since the middle ages, and by the early years of the last century had reached an all-time low of just 5% of land area. There was a real crisis during the first world war, when so much timber was needed for the war effort that trees were chopped down almost indiscriminately, with potentially disastrous effects.

Members who have read Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s classic “Sunset Song” may recall the reaction of the small farmer Chae to his wife when he returned from the trenches and found that the woods around Kinraddie had been cut down.

He said:

“Hadn’t she got eyes in her head, the fool, not telling him before that wood was cut? It would lay the whole Knapp open to the North East now and the fair end of a living here.”

That is the important thing about trees, as others have said: they are good not only for the soil but for shelter belts for farming. Anyone who has been on the north-east coast of Scotland on a windy day will appreciate the need for trees around that area.

Trees have played a vital part in small farming for generations, and now they also play an important part in flood prevention along many of our rivers. The creation of the Forestry Commission in 1999 was a reaction to falling wooded areas and a real attempt to reverse that.

As the hon. Gentleman noted, Scotland has the highest percentage of woodland cover in the UK at 18% of our land area. That is predominantly—74%—softwood, which as he rightly said is productive, with the remainder being principally native woods. There have been attempts, notably by the Cairngorms national park, to plant trees to regenerate and extend the remnants of the ancient Caledonian forest that at one point covered the whole of Scotland. Those trees provide a haven for much of our native wildlife. Those who drive around my constituency can see red squirrels—our trees are one of the last redoubts of that magnificent creature. In other areas, forests provide habitat for the endangered native Scottish wildcat. Tree planting helps the environment and the conservation of species, and that should not be overlooked.

Alex Chalk: Does the hon. Gentleman therefore agree that while one must always look at economic issues, our environmental and cultural heritage and what we can do to preserve the diversity of our wildlife must also be core priorities in the debate?
Mike Weir: That is exactly the point I was making. Trees are important for many reasons. They provide a huge commercial opportunity, which I accept, and that exists in Scotland at the moment, but we must also preserve our ancient woodlands. People like to walk in woods, and they like them for leisure activities. Frankly, there is a huge market for leisure activities in woods that are not being chopped down.

There is a lot we can do and, as the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) pointed out, there is a huge benefit to be had in fighting climate change, because growing wood takes up more carbon. However, much of the forest planted since the first world war has been planted for economic reasons, and that is not always understood. By its very nature, forestry is a long-term investment as trees take many years to grow to full maturity, and there can be a lack of understanding when woods that have stood for many years are cut down. That happened in my constituency: when wood came to its maturity, the trees were chopped down and there was a bit of a public outcry because well loved woods were going. However, trees are a crop, much as any other, which will be harvested. They will be replaced or replanted, but it will take many years for the new trees to come to maturity. Perhaps a bit of public education is needed in some areas as to the nature of forestry, with people understanding that it is a crop.

Today, forestry is estimated to contribute almost £1 billion a year to the Scottish economy, and it supports more than 25,000 full time equivalent jobs. Much of the activity in forestry comes from the Scottish rural development programme, which is funded via the EU, providing real support for rural communities. As we do in many debates, I ask the Minister, in this apparently new era of the Government telling us exactly what they intend to do before article 50 is triggered, what they will do to ensure that such funds will still be available should we exit the European Union. Forestry is a long-term business that requires stability and confidence for investment decisions to be made both in planting and in timber processing. At present, the forestry industry enjoys zero or low tariffs on trade within the European Union, so it is vital that a level playing field remains with other parts of the Union should the UK end up exiting. Support industries such as forest industries are sensitive to sudden dips in demand. Even a short-term fall in planting due to uncertainty could put many Scottish businesses such as tree nurseries at risk, so long-term certainty is important for the industry.

The Scottish Government recognise the extreme importance of the industry and are taking the steps they can to reassure investors that Scotland is open for business in both planting and investment in the processing sector. They have recently held two summits with the forestry sector to listen to its concerns and ambitions on the future of forestry. The Rural Economy Minister, Fergus Ewing, has met leading representatives of forest management investment companies to try to reassure them as much as possible. The Scottish Government currently have a consultation on the future of the forestry industry. They are making a real attempt to grow the industry of, as the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire put it, the missing “F” in the debate, to provide jobs in many rural areas such as mine and those of my hon. Friends who are here today.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman again on what he said about forestry. It is an important industry, but I would like the Minister to address where we are going on funding for future forestry enterprises if we are leaving the EU.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): We have heard from my fellow office bearer of the all-party group on forestry, my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies). I support and reinforce all the points he made.

As someone with a direct family connection to the forestry and timber industry, I declare an interest in the subject. My husband plants tens of thousands of trees every year in Northumberland, as did his father before him, and his grandfather planted more than half a million trees after the second world war, when most of the timber had been cut for the war effort and shipbuilders on the Tyne. If my husband could, he would probably reforest the whole of Northumberland in native, ancient hardwoods, but perhaps that is a step too far for the Government. I declare my bemusement at why current tree planting rates are so low—despite my husband’s best efforts—when, as my hon. Friend eloquently pointed out, it can provide solutions to a wide range of problems that face us in the 21st century.

I would like to cover in more detail some of the issues my hon. Friend mentioned. The first is flooding, which has been a big issue for us northern MPs over the past few years. We do not yet hear strongly enough from the Government that they understand how we can genuinely alter the ecosystem to reduce that long-term risk. I am on record as saying that there is clear evidence that tree planting can have a positive impact in reducing future flood risk.

The management plans based on river basins that are coming through are much more robust, and there is a serious tree planting part to that picture, which is encouraging. However, we really need to drive that forward to ensure that it is not lost. Rather than the unambitious target of 11 million trees being planted under this Government, I suggested in the House back in December last year that we should look at a number closer to 200 million. That sounds like a big number, but it is not that much acreage. The Minister may not recall my suggestion, which was that rather than planting one tree for every five citizens we should plant five trees per citizen. There is a big difference in those numbers, but, with political will and an understanding of the benefits, we can aspire to go much further.

Planting trees in the uplands as part of a wider natural flood management plan can reduce downstream flood risks. It is instinctively the right thing to do. Particularly in Cumbria, where for many years upland behaviour has been driven by the level of EU funding for sheep on uplands, there has been a lack of planting, so now we have long-term water retention issues, to which trees would make a significant difference. A number of publications by Forest Research and the forestry trade body Confor have highlighted the opportunities. Projects such as slowing the flow at Pickering in North Yorkshire show the practical benefits clearly.

Critics say that trees take too long to grow to play a major part in flood risk. I would answer that in two ways, not only because I am married to a man who...
thinks long-term—that has been drilled into me after 20 years of marriage—but because the tree is a vital component of the work. Research has shown that tree planting can have an impact on water flows within a year as tree roots take hold and the ground is disturbed. More importantly, it is time that we looked at long-term solutions to long-term systemic problems rather than being satisfied with quick fixes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire listed a number of 21st-century challenges to which forestry can provide solutions, which should all be addressed for the long term in a sustainable way: delivering lasting employment in rural areas; building warm, attractive homes that people want to live in; creating beautiful woodland habitats for recreation and wildlife; and tackling future risks from climate change and flooding. Those issues do not require quick fixes, they need a considered long-term approach. That is not something that Governments are naturally inclined to. I appreciate that it is difficult, but that is where forestry comes in. It can deliver for the economy, for our communities and for the environment.

So why are we hesitating? The Government have set a modest target, and we will struggle to meet that unless something miraculous happens. I find it difficult to listen to climate change alarmists and hear about Government policies that drive less economically efficient use of taxpayers’ money for energy and climate change planning, when we could plant the most efficient, cheapest carbon capture technology, which nature has already given us: the tree. Perhaps the Minister will inform us of whether any work is being done with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to consider how we can join up our thinking about that.

What can be done? First of all, let us support good planting schemes by getting them through the application process quickly and efficiently and not miring applicants in paperwork and delay. An exciting application in my constituency highlights what can be achieved. As the Minister will know, we have a plan to plant 600,000 trees on land at Doddington North, near Wooler, one of the more northern towns in my constituency. That is almost half the number of trees so far planted in 18 months in the whole of England. Doddington will be a great example of modern, mixed forestry—a range of tree species planted with open spaces and designed to fit into the existing landscape and deliver a huge range of benefits. The Doddington plan was launched this summer near Wooler at our local countryside show, the Glendale show. There was wide support from the community and even wider support for the fact that the consultation had started such an early stage. Andy Howard, the man behind the scheme, was able to tell the local community a positive story:

“Our design for the Doddington North wood can provide a very diverse ecology with a wide range of species of tree, plant, bird and animal life supported.”

Let me now return to 21st century problems and the practical ways in which forestry, such as what is being done at Doddington, can provide solutions. We are all passionate about protecting wildlife, especially totemic species such as the red squirrel. Northumberland is one of the few areas where there is still the chance to maintain the red squirrel’s habitat and fight off the grey squirrels that try to invade the space. Doddington is in a red squirrel buffer zone, and a specific focus of the scheme is to increase the amount of habitat that supports red squirrels. The scheme will also provide significant flood mitigation measures, as two tributaries for the Till floodplain below the site in Glendale start on Doddington moor.

As for jobs, the largest local sawmill, A & J Scott Ltd, an independent business employing more than 100 people in my constituency, is keen for the Doddington scheme to go ahead. It needs a guaranteed supply of wood, and there is worry at forecasts showing that the supply of timber from the UK will tail off unless we increase planting rates now. Robert Scott, the managing director, said:

“An afforestation plan of this scale could be very beneficial to our business in the future. We have in recent years, expressed our concerns regarding the future supply of the raw material for our sawmill.

It is clear that the volumes of saw log material will decline within the next 10 years and we are concerned that our ability to maintain a steady supply will be compromised, thus threatening the future of our business.”

That is a clear and worrying statement, and it is well borne out by the facts.

I want to mention two recent reports. In 2014 the Forestry Commission’s 50-year timber availability forecast showed a damaging fall-off in future timber supply. Confor analysis suggested that 1,000 rural jobs in constituencies such as mine could be lost unless that is plugged. In June, a report on wood fibre availability and demand showed clearly that demand for wood, for new homes and the wood products we all take for granted, will outstrip supply within little more than a decade. It also says:

“In Northern and Central England, demand already exceeds potential availability.”

Do we really want to import more wood at higher cost, threaten rural jobs, rely on short-term fixes for flooding, and reduce the supply of a beautiful, flexible and sustainable material with which to build new homes? I do not believe we do, and that is why I am bemused.

People love trees. Confor and the Woodland Trust both support a policy of the right tree in the right place. At the moment, we seem to be pursuing a policy of almost no trees, in no places. Why are we making it so difficult? Let us support great schemes such as the one at Doddington, and our forestry and timber industry; let us begin working out how to remove the barriers to planting and get more trees in the ground; and let us start soon, or future generations across rural Britain will pay the price.

10.4 am

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on securing such an important debate and delivering such a fine speech, full of detail about the works of the Scottish Government and how well we are doing. It is very much appreciated. He mentioned his constituency interest in the forestry and timber industries, and I have a similar interest. Forestry and timber have deep roots in my constituency. Indeed, the tree family is part of our family tree there. [Interruption.] It gets worse—but I do want to change tack and be serious, because the industry is an important part of the economy; and the family aspect is important, because there is great potential for our young people when they are building careers.
When we grow trees in my constituency, we grow careers for people who want a rewarding job. I am keen for girls and young women in particular to take up the opportunities. We take forestry seriously—not least because I share my constituency area with the Forestry Minister in the Scottish Government, Fergus Ewing. However, forestry is also seen as a major developing industry in the highlands. That growth and development can happen only if we have a responsible commitment to sustainability. The Scottish Government see great potential in forestry, and consider it an excellent area in which to get young people involved; but it must be supported and developed, and I know that they are committed to taking their good work to greater heights.

The headquarters of Forest Enterprise Scotland is in my constituency, in Inverness. It is responsible for managing Scotland's national forest estate and contributes to what I would call the local five-a-day of our economy—health, wellbeing, education, community development and protecting our natural and cultural heritage. Its work has the potential to benefit not only my constituents but all the people in Scotland, and beyond.

The Scottish School of Forestry, Inverness College, University of the Highlands and Islands, is the principal institution for forestry training and education in Scotland. We have a good reputation locally for providing successful forest managers in both the public and private sectors of the industry. The school acquired its sites from the Forestry Commission in 1972 and sits in its own 10-hectare woodland. It is the only forestry training provider to deliver higher and further education in its own practical training environment.

Among the area’s timber industries is Gordon Timber, in Nairn, which was founded in 1862. Since the late 1880s it has been managed by four generations of the same family, and is now recognised as one of the top sawmilling companies in the UK. The BSW Timber sawmill in Boat of Garten is a major employer in the area, and our plant contributes significantly to the local economy. BSW Timber was founded in 1848 and is the UK’s biggest sawmiller. It employs more than 1,000 people across seven locations, four of which are in Scotland.

Norbord, in Inverness, was the first manufacturer of oriented strand board in Europe. It was also the first OSB plant in Europe to receive Forest Stewardship Council accreditation, demonstrating commitment to the environment. Production at Inverness and Genk combines to make Norbord one of the largest OSB producers in Europe. Earlier this year, the Canadian company Norbord announced that it plans to invest up to £95 million in its wood panel factory near Inverness.

The final business I want to mention is MAKAR at Loch Ness, which has established a progressive timber-based design and build system that is rooted in the resources of Scotland. It has honed its knowledge of modern construction methods to get the optimum performance from home-grown timber. Not only does that reduce the carbon footprint of MAKAR’s buildings; it stimulates a regional industry that feeds investment into the economy. It is important that we support tree planting in Scotland, and note the wise words of the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire about investing in the future.

Forestry is a devolved matter within the UK, and Scottish Ministers already direct domestic Scottish forest policy. However, domestic forestry is heavily influenced by EU policies and regulations, and co-financed funding is received for Scotland’s rural development programme. The Scottish National party in government has created the most ambitious planting target in the UK. England and Wales have annual targets of 5,000 hectares and 1,000 hectares respectively. Our target is 10,000 hectares. Scotland created 83% of all new woodland in the UK in 2015-16, so there is considerable development in tree planting in Scotland.

A recent report for the Forestry Commission assessed the potential role of UK forestry in combating climate change. Forestry Commission Scotland recently published its climate change action plan, setting out the action it intends to take to increase the contribution of Scottish forestry to the response to the challenges of climate change. The plan focuses on five key areas: protecting and managing existing forests; woodland creation, including energy crops; adapting to climate change, with a major focus on countering fragmentation through forest habitat networks; sustainably produced wood for energy and construction; and reducing the forestry sector’s carbon footprint, for example through improved timber transport infrastructure. Planning authorities should therefore consider the contribution that trees, woodland and forestry can make to local strategies in their efforts to adapt to climate change.

Alan Brown: My hon. Friend has talked about climate change and sustainability, which is what tree planting is all about. Is it not crazy that the Government currently provide renewable subsidies for biomass energy, which is completely contradictory to sustainability and tackling climate change?

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend makes the point clearly. I certainly agree that there is a nonsensical approach to renewable energy policy in the UK at the moment, which should be reviewed.

I want to go on to the issues facing the forestry sector. Given that the Scottish forestry sector receives vital support from the EU, the Scottish Government are focused on continuing investment in the sector to ensure economic growth, so that the reckless gamble of Brexit does not impact on that vital Scottish industry. The Scottish rural development programme, which is funded via the EU, provides vital support for the Scottish forestry sector and rural communities.

One of the main threats of Brexit is the potential for timber supplies to the domestic processing sector. New planting by the private sector is particularly sensitive to confidence about the availability of SRDP grant support in one to two years’ time and wider uncertainty in investment and land markets. I would like to hear reassurance from the Minister that the UK Government are taking steps regarding the future availability of forestry grants and that mitigation will be provided on that issue.

It is of extreme importance to reassure investors that Scotland is open for business, in both planting and investment in the processing sector. Timber processing has expanded significantly in the past 10 years. The Scottish Government have held two summits with the
forestry sector to listen to its concerns and ambitions for the future of forestry in Scotland. EU referendum issues were discussed indirectly, with regard to securing future funding for woodland creation grants; even there, the EU is important.

Our Rural Economy Minister, Fergus Ewing, has met with leading representatives of forestry management and investment companies to provide reassurance that the Scottish Government are committed to seeing the forestry sector thrive. Currently, the forestry sector enjoys zero or low tariffs on trade within the EU, so it is vital that there is a level playing field with other parts of the European Union. Support industries, such as forest nurseries, are very sensitive to sudden dips in demand, and even a short-term fall in planting could put some Scottish nurseries at risk.

As I said, the SNP has created the most ambitious planting target in the UK, at 10,000 hectares a year, and Scotland created 83% of all new woodland in the UK in 2015-16. Since the forestry grant scheme opened in April 2015, more than 1,000 applications, worth £45 million, have been submitted, including for more than 8,500 hectares of woodland creation. Of that, 4,300 hectares of woodland creation, with a value of around £23 million, has been approved.

This issue is very important. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire for securing the debate and allowing it to be discussed. We are approaching Christmas, and it is important to end on the right tone. Christmas trees are an important seasonal part of Scotland’s rural economy. Scotland’s forests provide homes for wildlife, as my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Mike Weir) mentioned, as well as places for recreation, and they help to reduce the impact of climate change and flooding.

To underline the importance of the industry, the First Minister has encouraged people to support Scotland’s rural economy this Christmas by buying home-grown Christmas trees. Two Norway spruce trees, grown by Highfield Forestry in Beauly—right on the edge of my constituency, in an area I used to cover as a local councillor—were delivered to the First Minister’s official residence, Bute House. Let us hope that tree planting and the timber industry in Scotland and the UK have a very happy new year. We wait to hear the answers on how that will be delivered.

10.15 am

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on securing this debate. He does an excellent job chairing the all-party group on forestry.

Here we are, having this debate in Westminster Hall, and we can look around and see the timber not only in this room but in Westminster Hall itself and the oaks that were used to build that huge roof. Oaks were cut down over the years to build our fleet, when we went across the world and did various things. I will not go into the details of everything we did, but much was successful, although others may not say so. Over that period, we naturally cut down a great deal of oak forest. Wood was then had their effect, and we set up the Forestry Commission after the first world war to plant a great number of trees.

Yesterday, we took evidence in the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as part of our forestry inquiry. The one great plea made on grants was to bring back the one-stop shop. People are finding that when they apply for grants, they have to go through Natural England and the Rural Payments Agency and deal with DEFRA. It seems to be taking up to a couple of years to get a grant through, which is just not acceptable. Now, as we look to reform after leaving the European Union, there is much we can do with that grant scheme to make it simpler and more encouraging for landowners to plant trees.

Our Scottish friends who are here are to be congratulated, but I want to prick their bubble just a tiny bit. Some land in the UK is much more suitable than other parts for planting trees, and other land may produce 4 tonnes of wheat per acre. Some of their land in Scotland may not produce 4 tonnes of wheat per acre, so the competition for that land between crops and trees is not quite so great as elsewhere. In the north of England and Wales, there is much land that will be very good for forests, where we can create a crop—we must remember that it is a crop.

I declare an interest: I am a farmer. I do not have a big farm. If I choose to plant trees on my farm, I lock them in for one, two, three or perhaps four generations. If someone has only a small farm, they may not want to do that. I am sure the Minister is aware of that. There is a way we can manage forests: we can have large forests, perhaps on some of the marginal land. We can have deciduous trees and conifers, perhaps with strips of deciduous trees around the edges. We can make it much more accessible to the public and aesthetically beautiful and still have a crop—we must remember that timber is also a crop.

Half the time, what puts a lot of landowners off planting trees is that when they do so, a lot of the population then say, “Over our dead bodies will you cut down any of those trees.” However, trees are a living crop. They grow and mature, and then we use them for timber. Trees may be grown for timber, but they may also be grown for other crops, and they can provide recreation, aesthetic, conservation, and recreation reasons. Major forests may provide recreation, but that may also be done around our cities and highly populated areas. The great challenge for a grant system and support is to get people to plant in those areas, which is what I am keen to see.

Points have been made about climate change and the need to plant more trees to absorb carbon, as well as to stop flooding. That applies not just on marginal and steep land. In areas of run-off where intensive crops are

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes a telling point about the choices that face people when they are planting. Does that not underline the importance of EU grants in decisions on planting?

Neil Parish: Yes, the hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, but the issue is not just EU grants; it is how we deal with grants after we leave the EU. If we have the right mindset, we could produce a better grant scheme. If a percentage of better quality land further south in England where good crops can be grown is taken for trees, we will have to have a system to reward landowners for doing that. Otherwise, they will naturally decide to continue to grow other crops. Trees may be grown for aesthetic, conservation, and recreation reasons. Major forests may provide recreation, but that may also be done around our cities and highly populated areas. The great challenge for a grant system and support is to get people to plant in those areas, which is what I am keen to see.

Points have been made about climate change and the need to plant more trees to absorb carbon, as well as to stop flooding. That applies not just on marginal and steep land. In areas of run-off where intensive crops are
[Neil Parish]
grown, planting strips of woodland stops flooding and soil erosion. We can do an awful lot and we do not have to follow the common agricultural policy. I do not want future Governments to say, “We can’t do this.” We can do it if we look at it sensibly.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I thank the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) for bringing forward this debate, which is very topical. Balcus is a big timber firm in my constituency and I should declare an interest because I have a small amount of forested land on my farm. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that one way of developing our own policy in the United Kingdom is to have zoned areas of forestry? He referred to difficult land—at least, I think he hinted at difficult land in Scotland—but he did not mention difficult land in Northern Ireland. Does he accept that zoned areas of forestry might be an opportunity?

Neil Parish: Yes. I take the hon. Gentleman’s point, but we would have to be careful to have the right zoned areas. I am fearful of civil servants and others drawing lines on a map. They are not always entirely in the right place. We can have zoned areas, but we must put the right system in place to encourage people in those areas to grow trees. People will be more likely to do that if the right grant system is in place, because there will not be competition for what to grow on the land, so it could happen. We need to move forward and to make sure we have a balance between broadleaved trees and conifers. There is an anti-conifer world out there and some people say we cannot have conifers. We can, and in larger forests we can make sure the mixture is right from the recreation and management point of view.

Trees can be planted to stop flooding. I went up to Yorkshire recently with the floods inquiry where, traditionally, the Forestry Commission had turned the soil up by digging trenches and planted trees on top. When there is a flood, the water runs off down the furrow and straight into streams much quicker. As we plant, we must be more careful about possible flooding. Many things can be learned and achieved. With more trees we will create a better landscape and environment, and lock in carbon. We can reduce flooding and we can manage our land better. Highly productive farms have corners in fields and other places that are difficult to cultivate and they can be planted with trees. The area I represent includes the Blackdown hills, which are full of copses and small areas of woodland that are essential in our landscape. We should see more of that.

My final point is the fact that much of our woodland is not managed environmentally or for wood production. It is important that more woodland is managed.

Mrs Trevelyan: Does my hon. Friend agree that we have some serious problems because of lack of ability to make best use of woodland? In many parts of southern England, where forestry has been managed for many decades, we have a lot of ancient woodland and a concerted effort is needed to support land managers to improve that forestry.

Neil Parish: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. We could have a carrot and stick approach with small grants for such land. Some people buy woodland for tax advantages, so perhaps we could tweak that to require management of the land. If people buy land, should they leave it when it could be managed for environmental purposes as well as to provide a resource? We need a lot of woodchip and my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire made much of the fact that we import so much wood. We can grow more timber and we can burn it in wood-burning stoves in our homes because there is nothing like wood to provide a homely feeling. That cannot be beaten.

I again congratulate my hon. Friend for bringing forward this debate. We can grow more timber and create more forests with a better environment, but we must use our land carefully as we do that.

10.27 am

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. We have had an excellent debate. We have all talked positively about the benefits of trees, but we need hard action. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on his excellent opening remarks; I say that not just because he praised the Scottish Government in a way that made me fear he may be taken out the back and given a good thrashing afterwards. His wit and charm are critical to his chairmanship of the all-party group on forestry. He does an excellent job.

The hon. Gentleman started by asking arguably the most important question: why does tree planting matter so much? He then went on to describe the many ways in which it matters economically and environmentally, and the huge public support out there. The environmental impact is significant and we should be conscious of that as we make policy decisions. Four fifths of people agree that more trees should be planted; that gives the Minister a resounding mandate, well beyond the 37% of votes the Conservatives won in the general election. I suggest that 80% support should be embraced.

The hon. Gentleman was poetic. I do not know whether he was in the debate on ancient woodland, but talking about trees seems to bring out the inner poet in Members, which should be encouraged. We will all take with us the phrase, “the forgotten F-word”, which reinforces the point about forestry.

My hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Mike Weir) and Chief Whip made an excellent contribution and set out the historical context, which is particularly important when we talk about forestry. As we heard, that is a long-term investment, so learning from past mistakes is critical. He also brought up one of the most significant issues that we need to focus on in the debate: the importance of EU funding and SRDP funding in Scotland. He joined the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire in supporting the moves made by the Scottish Government.

The MP for just across the border, as I call her—the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan)—spoke about her husband. We all have challenges doing this job and have to score brownie points whenever we can with our spouses. The hon. Lady has earned many a token today. I commend her for not jumping to her feet when she heard the question “Should we leave the EU?”, although I did see some hair rise on the back of her neck at that point. She made an important point about flooding and also said that we should set more ambitious targets.
My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) made an excellent and pungent contribution. He used this excellent line: “When we grow trees, we grow careers.” That is a lovely way of putting it. Trees are long-term investments and their progress is slow to witness—a bit like many Government policies—so we sometimes do not notice that progress. What my hon. Friend said was a lovely way of reinforcing the point. Like a couple of hon. Members, he also mentioned BSW Timber, which is headquartered in Earlston in my constituency. It is always a delight to hear that excellent company mentioned. Clearly, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, as in mine, forestry is hugely important.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) made excellent points. He was obviously fresh from evidence sessions lined up because of this upcoming debate—that is the advantage of chairing a Select Committee. The point about a one-stop shop for grants is important. If we want to move on this issue, it is important that it should not take two years to get a grant through; otherwise, people will simply be put off by the process.

The hon. Gentleman also flushed out the interesting and important point about the competitive aspect of land use choices. Trees are a crop. The challenge, of course, is public attachment to them. We need to maintain the premise that they are a crop. Yes, they have wider benefits, but they remain a crop. That needs to be considered in relation to planning and harvesting. We need to ensure that people are not put off because of what I have described. The hon. Gentleman also made excellent points about the need for balance. This is not just about large-scale forestry; forestry, in many aspects, has a use in terms of both local land use and the wider benefits.

As I mentioned, forestry is very important in my constituency. BSW Timber is headquartered there, but there are many other forestry businesses. They may be involved in production. An example is Cheviot Trees, a state-of-the-art nursery in the Scottish borders and across in Northumberland. There are also many businesses that rely on forestry, such as the small business that I visited recently on the Buccleuch estate that makes timber homes. It is two guys working away on the estate and producing the most magnificent dwellings, which are now in huge demand.

The forestry industry contributes almost £1 billion a year to the Scottish economy and supports more than 25,000 jobs. It is clearly critical to Scotland’s economic success today and in the future. As we heard, forestry is a devolved matter, but it is heavily influenced by EU policies and regulation and, more importantly, by funding. In Scotland, that is through the Scottish rural development programme.

As we heard, forestry is a long-term business. Stability and confidence are required to enable investment decisions to be taken. Our domestic market is highly vulnerable to changes in currency and trade policy. The sector needs clarity on the regulatory frameworks, but also, critically, on funding models. Although the Government stepped in initially to honour funding models until 2020, we need to get on the front foot in terms of what will flow on afterwards.

Economically, forestry is a very sound and worthwhile investment, but the other aspect, which means that the debate should have been attended by everybody, not just a few of us with an interest in forestry, is that the environmental impact is also huge. Forestry is playing a key role in helping Scotland to meet its ambitious climate change targets. I will give some notes to the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire—he was very good on Scotland; there was just a slight gap there. [Laughter.]

Neil Parish: We’ll transfer him—don’t worry.

Calum Kerr: A free transfer!

Forestry will deliver on the annual carbon saving target. That was set at 0.6 million tonnes of carbon by 2010, which is rising to 1 million tonnes by 2020. Forestry is a huge part of the strategy in that area. As my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey said, the Forestry Commission recently published a climate change action plan, looking at how we can build on the current success. The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire made the fair point at the start that although Scotland may be leading the way in the UK, there is still room for improvement. There is acceptance of the Select Committee Chair’s point about the most effective use of land. There are areas that we can and will develop further.

We heard about the annual planting targets of 10,000 hectares, but as important are the moves to speed up and streamline the approval processes for sustainable plantations. As the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire outlined, that needs to happen in England; the Scottish Government are already on the front foot in that respect.

I mentioned Cheviot Trees. When this debate was announced, its managing director, Harry Frew, got in touch with me and asked me to attend this important debate if I could because, in his words:

“We don’t feel the urgency of tree planting is seriously understood nor is activity being implemented in a meaningful way in England.”

Mr Frew is clear that the Government get it—they have the nice words and some of the rhetoric—but what is missing is action. I hope that in this debate he will get reassurance from the Minister that there is action to match those words.

I have a genuine concern as we head down the Brexit path about the ability and resources in DEFRA to deliver in a post-Brexit world. My own experience of getting responses out of DEFRA, as the DEFRA spokesperson, has been poor. Responses are slow. I got a response today to a question submitted on 1 September, and two responses are still outstanding. In a resource-constrained environment, in which people are struggling to do the day job, how will the Department cope with the bigger challenge for DEFRA—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but it is the rule of the House that he should have only 10 minutes. He has now gone on for longer than that, and if he does not bring his remarks to a conclusion, that will cut down on other hon. Members’ time.

Calum Kerr: Thank you, Mr Bone. I apologise for running over; I am concluding. Will the Minister assure Harry Frew that there will be action to match the ambition? Will she tell us what she will do to ensure that forestry is a success story in the future as well as today?
10.38 am

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies). This has been a very interesting debate, and his opening remarks set the scene perfectly as to why tree planting is important and why we need to plant more trees. He mentioned the amount of wood that we import, how important it is that we become sustainable as a country, and the importance of planting trees for climate change, which several hon. Members mentioned. He also mentioned the construction industry and why it is important that we grow our own timber to make our homes more beautiful. I congratulate Hackney Council in this regard. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is aware of this, but it is the first council in England to promote timber in its planning policy for building.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) made some excellent points. He requested more support for farmers and landowners when applying for the grants, which is really needed, and I hope the Minister will give us some positive thoughts on that. He also mentioned that we must not forget we have to plant in urban areas as well. Before I became a Member of this House, I worked with a charity called Trees for Cities, which does great work; again, it would be good to see its work also supported. The hon. Members from Scotland who are here today talked powerfully about the importance of forestry to Scotland’s economy and their cultural heritage.

I want to focus on the issue raised specifically by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) about the importance of tree planting in managing flooding. I was also pleased to hear her talk about red squirrels; we have red squirrels in our garden, and it is great that we are supporting those through tree planting as well. Obviously, flood prevention is particularly important in my constituency. Hon. Members know about the terrible floods that we had in Cumbria just a year ago. This is something that—I will mention my husband as well—my husband and I have taken a very personal interest in. The River Marron flows through our land for half a mile, and the Marron goes into the Derwent, which caused a lot of the damage in Cockermouth and further downstream. We have been talking and working with the Rivers Trust and the Woodland Trust, and we are having 500 trees planted on our land—400 on the land and 100 along the banks of the river—to try to help with the kind of work that hon. Members have talked about.

Since I became a Member of Parliament, and more recently the shadow floods Minister, people have contacted me to talk about the particular role that tree planting has in slowing down the flow of water to help to combat levels of flooding. Somebody gave me a really interesting study from North America that was published in 2012. It found that deforestation in snowy regions at least doubled, and potentially quadrupled, the number of large floods occurring along rivers. There is a lot of really good scientific evidence out there that we can look at.

The Forestry Commission has also set out four ways in which trees can reduce flood risk. The first is by evaporating more water than other, shorter vegetation—coniferous trees are better at doing that, so we have to look at those as well as at deciduous. Woodland soils retain water better than soil under grass, which slows floodwater down before it gets to the rivers themselves. Trees alongside the rivers create more drag—we have had some trees placed to create drag in our river, to slow down the flow of water—and also help with the problems of soil erosion and the movement of sediment.

The deadwood along the rivers can play a vital role: it is obviously good for wildlife, but it can also slow down the flow of the waters. People often talk about concerns about deadwood because it can come loose, get clogged under bridges, dam and cause problems; but surveys of the River Kent in Cumbria found that the benefits outweigh the risks as long as the rivers are managed properly. That is really important; we do not always manage our rivers properly and we need to look at that very carefully. Obviously, the location of tree planting is important. We have to make sure that everything is done in the right place.

Will the Minister say what plans the Department has to roll out more of the natural flood prevention measures? Those are very low in cost when compared to paying afterwards for the cost of damage that floods have caused. As has been said, the Government have missed their tree planting target and Confor recently calculated that they are seven years behind schedule. The Woodland Trust also says that tree planting is now at an all-time low. Members have talked about how many more trees the Government have pledged to plant, and I understand that the Conservatives’ last manifesto included a pledge about tree planting. I urge the Minister to turn this very disappointing situation around and to do whatever she can to encourage more tree planting to push forward that manifesto promise. We really need to get back on track. If, in her response, the Minister could give us some idea about how we are going to get on track and meet those targets, I am sure that all hon. Members who have spoken today would be pleased to hear that we are going to make some progress, because we really need to.

10.44 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) on securing this debate. As has been said, there have been a number of contributions and interventions showing how important a role trees play in the heart of our nation, holistically as well as economically and environmentally.

My hon. Friend will recognise that forestry policy is a devolved matter, but I undertake to give an overall picture of tree planting in the UK while focusing on measures for which this Government are responsible. The debate offers me a chance to highlight our commitment to plant 11 million trees this Parliament, the role of forestry in the economy and the potential for woodland expansion to help us meet our carbon goals and our reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. We are actively working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on our national emissions reduction plan.

Hon. Members have highlighted many benefits of tree planting, such as flood alleviation and the potential for building homes. The phrase “The right tree in the right place” has been used, and certainly the right tree...
can be the solution to many of the challenges we face. Considerations include whether it is the right use of land, where to plant and whether trees are broadleaf or softwood. Those are challenging policy objectives to balance, but when the Government bring forward our 25-year environment plan next year, I hope hon. Members will have a good idea of what we intend to do in the long term.

Total tree planting in England, both new planting and restocking, was 4,000 hectares in the year to March 2016. In Scotland it was 12,500 hectares, and it was 1,900 hectares in Wales and 800 hectares in Northern Ireland. Traditionally, planting is measured in hectares rather than individual saplings, with different planting densities for different kinds of trees. In the case of new creation, Scotland’s ambitions have already been highlighted—10,000 hectares a year are planned. In the last year, it achieved 4,600 hectares. I understand that in Wales there is an ambition to plant 2,000 hectares a year, and 100 hectares was achieved. One hundred hectares was achieved in Northern Ireland as well, and as has been pointed out, in England it was about 700 hectares.

Neil Parish: I do not blame the Minister for one moment for the problems with the grants system at the moment, but I hope she will cover the idea of trying to bring back a one-stop shop to speed up grant applications. I think that would be really good, and I would like her to consider it.

Dr Coffey: I hope to cover that very soon, and I hope that my answer will satisfy my hon. Friend. One reason why there has been a dip compared with prior years is that a new scheme has come in, focused on European rules. It is usual that in the first year of such a scheme, take-up tends to be lower. I know that, certainly in England, we are already seeing some significant increases. Woodland cover in England is at its highest level since the 14th century and our aspiration is to grow it even further to about 12% coverage by 2060—as has been pointed out, it is currently at 10%.

Chris Davies: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I would appreciate being able to make a bit more progress, because I hope to answer some of the questions that my hon. Friend raised. If I have time, I will of course give way at the end.

We intend to grow woodland cover through the countryside stewardship woodland creation capital grant, the woodland creation planning grant and the woodland carbon fund, which has already been referred to. We recognise that there have been specific challenges to the take-up of countryside stewardship under the rural development programme. In England, the latest figures show that planting in 2015-16, and planting to September this year, will have achieved close to 1.4 million trees.

There were many reasons for the disappointing take-up. As I have already indicated, the new programme cycle is part of the challenge, but I understand that the Forestry Commission, the Rural Payments Agency and Natural England have worked together to resolve some of the technical challenges faced by the new scheme. To respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish)—I know I will be coming to his Committee to give evidence—I commit to looking into the issue in more detail to understand some of the issues and how further improvements could be made for the future. We know that recent improvements have had a beneficial impact and that the number of applications is certainly up, whether or not they are all approved. We will shortly put guidance on to gov.uk and advise the sector about a new round of countryside stewardship woodland creation grants and woodland planning and woodland improvement tree health grants in 2017. We encourage farmers and land managers to apply for the grants to expand and manage their woodlands.

The £1 million woodland creation planning grant scheme was launched last year. The first round was widely welcomed and generated plans for more than 1,000 hectares of planting. It supports the effective and sustainable design and planning of schemes, including the site at Doddington moor, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) referred. As she said, that has the potential to be the largest private sector woodland created in England for more than 20 years, with plans to plant 600,000 new trees. The project is still subject to regulatory approval from the Forestry Commission, and one challenge is that an environmental impact assessment will be required. The second round opened in September. The woodland creation planning grant has so far attracted applications that could cover a further 2,000 hectares and lead to 4 million trees being planted.

To further support tree planting, on 10 November the Forestry Commission opened the £19.6 million woodland carbon fund, which is aimed at boosting woodland creation rates and helping the Government’s future carbon targets. We are aiming specifically to generate private sector investment for large-scale forestry, which will serve the purpose of being a carbon sink and could be a future source of supply, as has been indicated.

On leaving the European Union, without prejudging any future discussions, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has said that there will be support on a value-for-money basis, following the setting of policies that are bespoke to the needs of this nation. As for actual schemes, I suggest that the schemes that were approved up to the autumn statement will be honoured in full. People often seek certainty on the maintenance part of schemes, and I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire that future schemes will be developed as part of our work on the environment plan.

On the barriers to getting grants and the timeline of how long it takes, I understand that the countryside stewardship schemes, which do not require an environmental impact assessment, are being handled rather quickly, and that the challenges relate to larger schemes. We remain keen to minimise and streamline regulatory burdens where appropriate. We are considering consulting on the EIA regulations, including those relating to forestry, to see what we can do to improve the process while preserving good environmental outcomes.

On commercial forestry, to achieve the 12% woodland cover ambition, we need more forestry investment by the private sector. We are committed to working with the industry and rural businesses to support landowners to plant more trees. The public forest estate is the biggest single producer of timber in England, supplying around 49% of softwood last year. Historically, all woodlands in England were managed to produce fuel
and fibre. The PFE will continue to supply a very large proportion of wood in the future while we work with landowners and timber processors to further increase volumes of softwood and hardwood coming to market in the medium and long term. That will be achieved by establishing new productive woodlands and by bringing more existing woodlands into productive management.

I know that the production sectors that use timber would like to expand the supply. The UK currently imports 80% of the timber it uses, so we recognise the opportunities that exist for rural economies if we can expand the domestic supply. That is why I am pleased that, through such things as the woodland creation planning grant, we are starting to see signs that investors and forestry businesses are developing larger-scale, more commercially viable schemes.

As has been said in many contributions today, the benefits of trees are multiple. As we consider our future approach to the environment through the 25-year environment plan, we know that woodland and forestry have much to offer. As well as supplying timber, trees and forestry businesses are developing larger-scale, more opportunities that exist for rural economies if we can expand the supply. The UK currently imports 80% of the timber it uses, so we recognise the opportunities that exist for rural economies if we can expand the domestic supply. That is why I am pleased that, through such things as the woodland creation planning grant, we are starting to see signs that investors and forestry businesses are developing larger-scale, more commercially viable schemes.

As for the flooding we have seen in recent years—I recognise that the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) had that horrendous experience a year ago—it is not possible to protect all communities completely from every instance of flooding, but with the frequency and size of floods predicted to increase, we need to adopt a whole-catchment approach to flood risk management. That approach can enhance the performance of traditional flood defences. Trees planted as catchment approaches can help with heavy rain, as I have indicated. I assure the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire like to intervene briefly, before he has his two minutes to wind up?

Chris Davies: I would. We hear a great deal from the Minister’s civil servants about how woodland cover is at its highest since the 14th century. I want to work out, first, why we are using that particular factoid and secondly, who can prove that we are in that position.

Dr Coffey: Well, I use the statement because it is accurate and true. At times people challenge us, understandably, and accuse us of various things to do with forests, and I want to point out how successive Governments—but this Government in particular—have accelerated tree planting in recent years, recognising the importance of trees to our natural landscape.

I look forward to working with hon. Members and stakeholders in woodlands and forestry to promote more private investment in the sector, not only to secure greater economic benefit but to capture more carbon and maintain the public benefits that we all value so much from our existing woodlands and forests and the wildlife and biodiversity that they support.

10.58 am

Chris Davies: May I say what a pleasure it has been to have this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Bone? Thank you for allowing us to do so. I have just a couple of minutes; I would like to pick up on everybody’s comments, but time is against us, so I just say that “the right tree in the right place”, which my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) mentioned, is the phrase of the day, and we need to take note of that.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) mentioned careers. Forestry is no longer about somebody just going out into a wood with an axe; these are highly skilled, highly technical and recognised positions. I would recommend that anybody out there look for a career in forestry, because—my goodness me—what a career they would have. I praise considerably my great friends, the Members from Scotland, who are here today—I am delighted to be able to finish by praising them, because being part of the UK allows me to do so. We are better together, and I thank them.
There is much more I would like to say, but if we look out of the window opposite me in the Chamber we can see the wonderful Christmas tree in New Palace Yard. It is the festive season, and we are delighted about and looking forward to everything that Christmas brings. But I ask the Minister and everybody else, when they look at a Christmas tree outside or in their living room, to please think about extra planting from 2017 onwards.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered tree planting in the UK.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered transport infrastructure for proposed development of large logistics parks.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank hon. Members for attending the debate.

The need to transport essential supplies and other consumer goods around the United Kingdom has spurred the demand for large distribution parks, especially in my constituency of South Leicestershire and around the Midlands. Property developers have responded by lodging an increasing volume of applications with local planning authorities, many of which are small and insufficiently resourced to deal with such large-scale proposals and the infrastructure required to support them. Often, the applications comprise large land-takes—many of greenfield sites and rural areas where there is little culture of planning across different authority boundaries, even between neighbouring authorities. As a result, there is a need for a co-ordinating national policy specifically governing the development of these large logistics parks.

The logistics industry has expanded over the past 20 years—not only to supply retail outlets, but to satisfy the boom in internet shopping, with which most hon. Members are well familiar. This year, online retailers such as Amazon and others account for one third of the warehousing property development market, with supermarkets accounting for one quarter. Currently, 80% of costs of all goods are transport costs, even before taking into account on-costs of infrastructure maintenance, the environmental costs of traffic congestion or, indeed, the health-related costs of air pollution. A recent World Bank report stated that congestion on UK roads is the worst in Europe, and the UK has the highest percentage of premature deaths owing to poor quality and polluted air.

The Government have defined a national policy, preferring the development of rail-based freight terminals and seeking to minimise fossil fuel-based road transport. For example, the Daventry International Railfreight Terminal close to the M1 in Northamptonshire, and near Rugby in Warwickshire and Lutterworth in my constituency, is a major development entering its third planned phase. Further planned developments are taking place at East Midlands Gateway with airport and rail connections, and near Hinckley, with a planned rail depot. Despite all that, there has been a proliferation of distribution centres reliant on road transport, notably in my South Leicestershire constituency and in adjacent constituencies. As the infrastructure rarely aligns with the speculative development of land-based centres, roads and highways are frequently under strain owing to the volume of traffic they now carry.

As there is no national policy of locating distribution centres to match essential regional needs for longer-term economic development, there continues to be what I call the piecemeal development of many road-based sites. At a local level, there is little integration of inter-authority planning for optimum locations. Such unplanned
development leads to increased volumes of traffic on local roads. The resulting traffic congestion leads to delays and queues at key junctions, disrupting citizens’
day-to-day travel to work, school and health facilities. As a constituency MP, I experience this congestion when I take my daughter to school. I see hundreds of
heavy goods vehicles every week and I have witnessed accidents involving HGVs in and around the Magna
Park area.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I congratulate
my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He makes an
important point about traffic congestion. There is an
Amazon fulfilment centre in Rugeley in my constituency,
and HGV fly-parking is a real problem for local residents.
Does he consider that to be an issue as well?

Alberto Costa: Yes, that is another issue that should
be taken into account.

The Government must now take the whole matter
into account, and I ask them to consider developing a
national policy on the location of these large logistics
parks.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): In my area,
there is a proposed development on green-belt land
near a one-way motorway junction. The Greater
Manchester spatial strategy includes plans for the motorway
junction to become two-way in 40 years, but the
development may take place within the next two years if
that very important land is taken out of the green belt.
There are also developments with no consultation in
St Helens, in the neighbouring borough, which will
increase the traffic again on that junction. Does the
hon. Gentleman agree we need some national infrastructure
in place to develop the proposals for logistics sites on
these important pieces of land?

Alberto Costa: I agree with the hon. Lady’s points. I
want to give others the opportunity to speak in this
important debate, but my point is that it is now time for the
Government to set out their proposals for a national
policy on the location of these large logistics parks.

Amanda Milling rose—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. We have a slight
problem in that I do not know whether anyone else has
the Minister’s permission to speak.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John
Hayes): With your permission, Mr Bone, I would be
delighted to hear other contributions.

11.7 am

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I am very
grateful to the Minister. As I said, I congratulate
my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto
Costa) on raising the issue and calling for this debate.
It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship,
Mr Bone.

My constituency, Cannock Chase, is home to several
large logistics parks, largely because of the constituency’s
proximity to motorways, rail and the trunk road network.

For instance, Kingswood Lake business park in Cannock
is home to logistics businesses such as APC Overnight.
Given its proximity to the M6 and M54 motorways,
Cannock and the surrounding area is increasingly being
considered for other large logistics centres. However,
the issues that my hon. Friend highlighted can be illustrated
by some of the issues faced by residents and businesses in Rugeley.

In contrast to Cannock, Rugeley is not within a mile of
the motorway network but, as I mentioned, it is
home to one of Amazon’s fulfilment centres. The site
was initially developed speculatively, with Amazon
identifying it as an ideal site in the midlands to home
one of its fulfilment centres. The site and the town do
not have the facilities, however, to cope with large
volumes of HGVs, often only having a small turnaround
time window at the Amazon site. Specifically, there is no
lorry parking locally and no facilities for drivers to use.
The consequences, as I have mentioned in previous
debates, is HGV fly-parking.

Residents of Rugeley, particularly those of Leathermill
Lane, Love Lane and local businesses based in Towers
business park on Wheelhouse Road, are plagued by
lorries parked up overnight that are probably best described
as being littered around the streets of Rugeley. Not only
is this an inconvenience to road and footpath users; but it
creates a safety issue on those roads. Even worse,
residents and businesses have to put up with the litter
that the drivers leave behind. I will not elaborate; I leave
it to hon. Members’ imaginations to work out what that
litter includes. I have been in regular contact with
Staffordshire County Council and the local police
to call on them to take action to address those issues. I met
Amazon earlier this week to raise the issue directly. This
symptom highlights the need to consider transport
infrastructure when developing plans for logistics parks.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Like the constituencies
of both my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member
for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), whom I
congratulate on securing this debate, my constituency
has a very large number of logistics parks. We must not
stand in the way of the economic development, but it is
important that infrastructure is provided.

The issue is a concern to my constituents in villages
such as Monks Kirby and Pailton, who are affected by
the proposals for the large logistics site in Leicestershire.
The solution to that problem is improving the A5; I
hope the Minister will tell us about proposals for dualling
the A5, which forms the boundary between my constituency
and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for
South Leicestershire.

Amanda Milling: I completely agree with a couple of
my hon. Friend’s points. We must not get in the way of
economic development, which I will touch on shortly.
The A5 goes all the way up to Cannock, and the road is
permanently clogged. I support anything that will lead
to the A5 being duagged as quickly as possible, which
would alleviate many of the problems we are talking
about today.

Consideration of transport infrastructure is particularly
important when we consider the redevelopment of the
Rugeley B power station site, which is opposite the Amazon
fulfilment site. These are early days, but the infrastructure
cannot cope now, so I have concerns about the plans for developing the site. The infrastructure we have now will not support further logistics centres.

Alberto Costa: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister and the Government should require neighbouring local planning authorities to consult jointly on planning development for such large logistics sites and other infrastructure? Proposals for the development of logistics sites, such as Magna Park, should be accommodated by adequate pre-planned development of road and rail infrastructure.

Amanda Milling: I completely agree. I get complaints about sites in neighbouring constituencies. We are so close to the M6 toll road and the M6 that other developments are in the pipeline. The Rugeley B redevelopment crosses the boundary between Cannock Chase District Council and Lichfield District Council, which need to work together. I am pleased that a taskforce is pulling together the two district councils, the county council and the local enterprise partnership. I have been calling on them to consider the strategic vision for the site so that we ultimately have highly skilled jobs for the future residents of Rugeley.

The situation in which we find ourselves in Rugeley with Amazon, and the situation in which we could find ourselves as we look to the redevelopment of the Rugeley B site, clearly demonstrate the need to consider infrastructure and the surrounding policy, and the need to work collaboratively at all levels.

I wholly agree with my hon. Friend that we must seriously consider introducing policy to ensure that consideration is given to the local infrastructure that such large parks require. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

11.14 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr. John Hayes): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Bone, and it is a double delight to speak at this small lectern, which is a new addition to this assembly that adds to both my status and grandeur, as if I needed either.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) on securing this debate. He is right that the circumstances he set out are the result of other changes. He is right to draw attention to the fact that this is a growing trend that is a result of the way that people obtain goods and the way those goods are dispatched.

I am inclined to the view of Schumacher, and I am a fan of his book “Small is Beautiful”. Of course, he said: “Man is small, and, therefore, small is beautiful.” I am inclined, too, to regard politics and commerce as best conducted on a human scale. Nevertheless, we must deal with things as they are. I understand that the consequences my hon. Friend set out present particular challenges in the area he represents. It is often said that there is a geographical triangle where there is a propensity to develop such sites, and his constituency is in that triangle.

As I know from earlier discussions with my hon. Friend, he knows that logistics is a vital part of our country’s economy and prosperity. I have responsibility for freight, which is, in part, why I am responding to this debate. I take a keen interest in how logistics continues to develop and in how we can support HGV drivers and businesses, but I am mindful of the effect of those businesses on communities, which is the essence of this debate. This is about how storage facilities are changing and how logistics parks affect local communities.

Mark Pawsey: I am delighted that the Minister is standing up for logistics. There is a lot of logistics development in my constituency, and it is often thought of as low-calibre work with hulky blokes throwing boxes around, but nothing could be further from the truth. These are high-tech, well-structured, well-managed and well-organised businesses that perform a vital function in getting goods to consumers.

Mr Hayes: In representing people in this House, and in serving in Government, we draw on our personal and constituency experiences. My uncle was a long-distance lorry driver, and my cousin followed him into that job. I represent many hauliers in South Holland and The Deepings, and I have regular dialogue with them. As Members would expect, I have discussions with the industry as a Minister.

I am equally anxious and concerned about the effects on traffic in local communities, particularly from developments around logistics sites, which my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire has mentioned. We need to, and can, strike a balance between the interests of the industry and the interests of local people. We often have to do that as Members of Parliament, and the Government perpetually do it. These things are never entirely straightforward, but I hope, in the short time I have available, to be able to set out how we can strike that balance.

Alberto Costa: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), and I agree with the Minister, but in my constituency I already have one of Europe’s largest logistics parks, which presently has between 9 million and 10 million square feet of warehousing. The proposal to double its size would unacceptably lower the quality of life of my South Leicestershire constituents. At what point do we say enough is enough? How large do these logistics parks need to get before we say that?

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend has many virtues, and two that stand proud are the determination and rigour with which he defends his constituents’ interests—a well-known aspect of his work in this House—and, secondly, his insight. That insight will have allowed him to determine, from my opening remarks in which I quoted Schumacher, where I intuitively stand on these matters. I will say more about that later in my speech, but my hon. Friend draws to our attention the important subject of scale. It would be easy for central and local government to assume that there should be no limits on scale, but I am not sure that that is the right approach. I look at these matters in a holistic way.

Yvonne Fovargue: Does the Minister also take into account the effects on air quality of these large logistic parks and the vehicle movements? For example, in Greater Manchester we have already failed to meet our air quality objectives on a number of occasions. The
new logistics parks will increase the standing traffic and will therefore have an effect on the local community’s air quality.

**Mr Hayes:** Barely a day goes by when I do not think about air quality. I was in an inter-ministerial meeting yesterday afternoon to discuss exactly that. It is important that we recognise that the effect on the environment of large developments can be significant and must always be taken into account when we consider them.

Overall responsibility for planning in England rests with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, so we are straying on to his territory to some degree, which I am reluctant to do. As the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire will both know, it is the Department for Communities and Local Government that issues national planning practice guidance on how the Government expects planning to help to deliver sustainable development, but the planning system has at its heart ensuring that the right development takes place in the right places. Not all places are suitable for particular kinds of development; that is the essence of what my hon. Friend has argued today.

The planning system has benefits to the community as well as to the wider economy. Local plans, prepared by local planning authorities in consultation with the community, are at the heart of that system. They must be prepared with a mind to contributing to sustainable development that is consistent with the principles and objectives set out in the national planning policy framework. A local plan should include the strategic policies to deliver homes and jobs, the provision of retail and commercial development, and the provision of infrastructure, including infrastructure for transport.

**My hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire:** is concerned that local planning authorities will work in isolation and not address wider regional issues. I reassure him that the national planning policy framework expects local authorities to work with neighbouring authorities and transport providers to develop strategies for the provision of the viable infrastructure necessary to support sustainable development. Indeed, I will go further than that: further to his arguments today, I will discuss with my DCLG colleagues whether the framework is as effective as it might be in respect of transport. It may be that we can do more. I do not want to say anything definitive today—you would not expect me to do so, Mr Bone—but given my hon. Friend’s remarks today and with respect for the case that he has made, we may be able to do more.

It is very important, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) said, that we consider this in the round with the transport infrastructure that supports the development, so I want to explore the matter further. I shall come back to the A5 in a minute, but I want to make it clear that, as a general principle, transport infrastructure and these developments must be hand in glove.

The second core point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire was that all developments that generate significant amounts of movement must be supported by a transport statement or assessment. Plans and decisions should take account of whether opportunities for sustainable transport modes have been taken up to reduce the need for major transport infrastructure changes. Such plans should also consider whether improvements within the transport network can be undertaken to limit the significant impacts of the development in a cost-effective way. Crucially, they should plan positively for the development and infrastructure required in the area. They are designed to take into account longer term trends and changes of the kind that my hon. Friend has set out.

Critically, the presumption built into the national planning policy framework is in favour not only of development but of sustainable development. How we define sustainability in respect of transport infrastructure is crucial, and I want to study that in greater detail, as I said a moment ago. Should my hon. Friend have further concerns about that or feel that additional clarity would be desirable, I will happily ask my colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government to meet him and discuss the matter. It is right that Ministers should always make ourselves available to Members, because by doing so we make ourselves available to the people we serve.

On development more generally, I recently waxed lyrical—at least I thought I was lyrical—on the subject of beauty. I add to what I said that all we build should be as good as it can be in its relationship with the local environment and in its aesthetic. That may sound odd in respect of what is essentially an industrial development of the kind that my hon. Friend has raised. Friend spoke of, but actually we once took the view that everything we build should take into account its aesthetic relationship with everything around it. The idea that we should take a crude, crass reductionist view of industrial development and the landscaping that surrounds it is not acceptable to me. Given my responsibility for the built environment, which crosses all Department’s areas of responsibility, I will certainly take a look at that subject too in relation to what my hon. Friend said.

Let me say a few things about the work I have been doing on heavy goods vehicles. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) raised what is known as fly-parking—the parking of heavy vehicles in inappropriate places. I have looked closely at that and have recently held two round-table summits on HGVs with large numbers of people from the sector to explore what more can be done, because I am determined that more can be done. It is absolutely right that we work with local authorities to take further steps to make that kind of parking, which I know causes such concern to my hon. Friend, her constituents and many others, a thing of the past; I intend to say more about that soon.

I want to develop a national plan, as was recommended in this debate, for good and sufficient overnight lorry parking, to ensure that we provide lorry drivers with the facilities they need and that inconsiderately or illegally parked lorries do not blight local communities—and I want to do it quickly. On the back of our discussions and the overtures made to me by hon. Members, my ambition is to identify how all the significant gaps in overnight lorry parking provision in England can be filled and for private provision to be made available as soon as possible, certainly over the next three to five years.
Quality standards have also been raised with me, as hon. Members will know. I am not satisfied that they are as should be for overnight parking facilities; there are some very good facilities, but by no means could all facilities be so described. I want to set national standards to ensure that our HGV drivers can park safely, securely and in reasonable comfort, with the baseline facilities that anyone would expect from a parking area.

I am looking closely at the provision of lorry parking spaces nationally. There are significant gaps in capacity, particularly in the east of England and the midlands. I have commissioned a fresh survey, which will be taken this winter, to update the figures on that. The standards that I have described, the further work on illegal parking and the work I want to do in a number of places will make a sea change to the provision.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but time has beaten us.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

South Sudan

[Mr Clive Betts in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I beg to move, That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in South Sudan.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, although it is no pleasure to consider the scale and depth of the plight of South Sudan today. We probably all remember that back in July 2011, we greeted what was then the world’s newest country, South Sudan. The hope was that decades of violence would end and there would be new beginnings for the South Sudanese people. Five years on, the country has been plunged into civil war once again, with the rebel leader Riek Machar calling for armed struggle against President Salva Kiir’s Government in Juba.

Although violence erupted again in July, we know that it had never been far away: the country has essentially been in conflict since 2013. We have seen instability and conflict spread throughout South Sudan, into some previously untouched areas such as the Equatorias and greater Bahr el Ghazal. The conflict has also taken on an ethnic dimension and brought to the surface historical injustices, along with present day grievances.

Humanitarian indicators rarely tell the whole story, but in the case of South Sudan, the numbers are staggering. Out of a population of 12 million, some 3 million people are displaced. Of those, 1.8 million are internally displaced inside the country—most people believe that is a conservative figure—and 1.2 million have fled as refugees to neighbouring countries. The indications are that 4.8 million people are currently food-insecure and that one in five South Sudanese women in the protection of civilian camps have reported sexual abuse. We know that women and girls have been disproportionately affected by the crisis in South Sudan, as they account for 57% of the registered internally displaced people. The situation is expected to deteriorate even further in 2017, with increased conflict, deepening food insecurity and a further deterioration of the country’s already desperate economic situation.

We recently had a clear warning from the United Nations special adviser on the prevention of genocide, Adama Dieng, that there is a strong risk of violence escalating along ethnic lines, with the possibility of genocide. We see hate speech, stereotyping and polarising rhetoric on South Sudanese radio and social media. Trust in an inclusive, distinctive South Sudanese national identity is at its lowest ebb. With the dry season approaching, there are fears of a large-scale Government offensive in the coming weeks.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He mentioned the UN special adviser. Does he agree that there is an incredibly important role for the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan, which has been spectacularly under-delivering, with poor leadership, and that UNMISS needs to be beefed up substantially and have its role extended and expanded, in line with the recent UN inquiry?
Mark Durkan: The hon. Gentleman has an acute insight into the country, from his time as the Minister for Africa. I pay tribute to his sterling work on the all-party parliamentary group for Sudan and South Sudan, which he vice-chairs; I serve alongside him as chair. He rightly raises the recurring criticism of the performance of UNMISS, but I do not want to turn this debate simply into a critique of its failures, although they are many. I want to see how together, at a UK level and internationally, we can better respond to the situation in South Sudan.

This is not to pretend that there are not other dire situations crying out for our attention and further effort. All of us will have been moved by the reports from Yemen on television and radio last night and this morning. We know that hon. Members right across this House are seized with the plight of people in and fleeing from Syria and surrounding countries. This debate is not an attempt to single out South Sudan as the only humanitarian crisis that warrants our attention and consideration.

In trying to help the situation in South Sudan, we have to confront the failures there. Those include failures in political leadership in the country, in terms of the President and the former vice-president, who is now in South Africa. Government and opposition forces are prepared to visit violence on their own people, and in parts of the country that were previously spared some of that violence. We have to be up front about those failures. Of course, we also have to recognise, as some have highlighted, how corruption and conflict have been drivers of each other in South Sudan. We saw that spelled out clearly in the report a few months ago by the Sentry, backed by George Clooney, in respect of both Sudan and South Sudan. We have to deal directly with the failure of both Sudan and South Sudan. I welcome the Government’s attempt to single out South Sudan as the only humanitarian crisis that warrants our attention and further effort.

In trying to help the situation in South Sudan, we have to confront the failures there. Those include failures in political leadership in the country, in terms of the President and the former vice-president, who is now in South Africa. Government and opposition forces are prepared to visit violence on their own people, and in parts of the country that were previously spared some of that violence. We have to be up front about those failures. Of course, we also have to recognise, as some have highlighted, how corruption and conflict have been drivers of each other in South Sudan. We saw that spelled out clearly in the report a few months ago by the Sentry, backed by George Clooney, in respect of both Government and opposition players there.

Faced with those challenges and difficulties, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) is right to call into question the performance and effort of the UN mission in South Sudan, and particularly the questionable leadership. However, rather than just offering righteous criticism, it is incumbent on the international community to provide a new resolve.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. The UN is a multifarious organisation. We should recognise that it is the UN’s special adviser on genocide who has sounded the alarm over the risk of genocide in the country and reminded people that all of us in the international community bear responsibility for monitoring the incitement to hatred.

Mark Durkan: I fully accept what the right hon. Lady has said. That is why I specifically quoted the UN adviser.

We have to look at what further action can be taken to help people in South Sudan who want to stand up against hate speech. We can talk about the scale of devastation in the country and forget that there are still people there trying to hold on to the fragment of civil society that remains. There are people in a range of churches who are trying to hold on and offer degrees of decency and cohesion. They should be our partners in trying to create some sort of coalition of hopeful purpose within South Sudan and internationally.

It is important that where we have political and diplomatic engagement at an international level in South Sudan, we must be straight and blunt with both Government and opposition forces and do what we can to get them to engage better and more consistently in dialogue. We also have to be much more active in our partnership with those who stand for the interests and rights of the South Sudanese people, and who do so without being implicated in any sort of corruption whatever.

There are non-governmental organisations in South Sudan, and they are well supported by some of the international NGOs, which of course find it harder to cope there because of the deteriorating security situation and the poor infrastructure. NGOs are finding it hard to keep themselves safe and to reach different parts of the country to provide the level of aid and services they want to give. Nevertheless, we need to stay fully engaged with them.

I recognise that the UK Government have made a point of ensuring a relatively joint effort for both Sudan and South Sudan on the part of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development, just as we in the all-party group have made a point of staying together and covering both Sudan and South Sudan. I welcome the Government's effort. I am not here to say that whatever failures there have been in South Sudan are a result of a failure of effort, initiative and intent on the part of the UK Government, but we always have to ask whether there is more that we could do and whether there are other partners with whom we can engage more actively.

I should mention the work done by the churches, not least the Catholic Church. Ahead of the debate, as well as the very good Library briefing, Members will have received excellent briefings from World Vision and the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, which works in South Sudan alongside its Irish counterpart, Trócaire, an organisation with which I am very familiar. We have also had important briefings from Amnesty International, Oxfam and others. When considering the role that the churches might play, we first have to show that we have listened to and heard many of the voices inside South Sudan. They have pointed to the scale of the problem and indicated the need for aid; they have also indicated their faith in the efforts of the international community.

We are seeing a deterioration into violence. That violence is being targeted more and more viciously at people who might previously have regarded themselves as safe, so the question arises whether there should be an arms embargo. The all-party group recently held a session at which we were informatively briefed by Dame Rozalind Marsden of Chatham House, who has deep experience of Sudan and South Sudan, as well as by Anna Oosterlinck from the UN panel of experts and Emma Fanning from Oxfam. The question of an arms embargo came up in the course of our discussions, and some people present said, “Well, there’s no point having an arms embargo because that will affect sophisticated arms, whereas people in South Sudan are being killed with machetes and fairly crude weapons.” That is a counsel of irresponsibility.

If the international community is in a position to impose an arms embargo on a situation that is clearly deteriorating, and if the violence involves not only crude traditional weapons but more sophisticated ammunition, then a clear stance has to be taken. The UK Government...
will say that they have reflected that stance at the UN, but some of these things need much more direct effort and engagement.

The deteriorating humanitarian situation exists in a political context, of course. I have no wish to rehearse the recent political history of South Sudan—the political destabilisation and how the conflict has emerged—but there are obviously questions about how the new Government formation is going to work. Many people have doubts about whether the new vice-president really has the capacity and standing to carry people in the same way as many people would say that, unfortunately, the displaced vice-president might be able to. There are dilemmas and challenges in taking forward the peace process.

Not only are there concerns about the humanitarian situation, with people not having the means of life and a place to live, but we have seen the return of cholera. It is present in nine counties, and it has returned largely because so many people are on the move. Their moving away from home has bought about diseases of that sort. That is an indicator of the further deterioration we are likely to see.

We are also witnessing continued human rights abuses by both the Government and the opposition, with attacks on their own people and violence being visited on civilians—people who would not be identified as combatants or as harbouring combatants in any way, and who should not be considered as such under any normal interpretation of conflict. They have found themselves grossly victimised. Ahead of the debate, Members will have received significant briefings from Amnesty International, which reissued its report from several weeks ago called "We did not believe we would survive". The report sets out a dire narrative of killings, rape, looting and all sorts of other depredations in Juba, which are now spreading more widely in South Sudan.

I pay tribute not only to those in the all-party group but to other Members who have raised many of the issues I am raising relating to the violation of human rights, including the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who will respond to the debate on behalf of the Opposition. They have raised a number of questions, and in fairness, the Government have acknowledge those issues. I stress that I am not here to criticise the Government for just providing commentary on the situation. I know just how difficult the situation is, but there is a danger if we in this House decide that somewhere like South Sudan is in the box marked “Too intractable” or “Just too difficult,” because that would ignore the dire plight of the people there. Not only would that be at the expense of the people of South Sudan, but we would deny support and solidarity to the many people who are trying to help them, whether they are from the international agencies in various arms of the UN or the key international NGOs and charities.

I have acknowledged the shadow Minister; I should also acknowledge the Minister, who recently attended a meeting, sponsored by the all-party group on women, peace and security, which focused specifically on South Sudan and was attended by several charities and campaign groups. Against the backdrop of the unprecedented levels of displacement, security and violence, the meeting highlighted how all that was bearing down on women and girls. We heard evidence on how circumstances for women and girls, which were already dire before 2013, have further deteriorated. One in five pregnant women die in childbirth and one in three pregnant or lactating women are malnourished. Of the children still in school, only 40% are girls. An adolescent girl in South Sudan is three times more likely to die in childbirth than to complete primary school.

Violence against women and girls is widespread—other hon. Members and I have previously debated that topic in this Chamber and elsewhere—particularly intimate partner violence. Rape, sexual assault and exploitation, early and forced marriage and abduction all continue to be reported to humanitarian agencies and other organisations. I am sure the Minister will recall from the meeting he attended that although the assumption when we talk about violence against women and girls in conflict situations is often that active combatants are committing the violence and abuses, it is happening much more widely and nefariously as well.

Initial analysis from the first prevalence study on violence against women and girls in South Sudan shows that in some areas of the country, more than 70% of women have experienced sexual and/or physical intimate partner violence, and one in three women have experienced some form of sexual abuse, which could include rape and transactional sex.

In that situation, when delivering whatever interventions we are part of—either directly or through shared international input—we must ensure that, in our support for conflict resolution and peace building in South Sudan, there is space for women’s participation both in formal conflict prevention and in the ongoing peace process. Of course, that participation is limited at the minute, if it exists at all. We should support people and organisations such as the South Sudan Women’s Peace Network, as well as the churches, as they make the call for at least 25% representation of women in institutional and constitutional reform processes, instead of the marginalisation and neglect that women in South Sudan face at the moment.

We were told back in 2013 that the UK was shifting away from “business as usual” in South Sudan. I do not decry the contribution that the UK has made to peace and development in the country; it has been significant. I pay tribute to DFID for the leadership that it has been able to provide in very difficult circumstances, and for what we hope will be the UK’s role in helping with peacekeeping operations, including as a member of the troika overseeing South Sudan’s peace process. In addition, as part of the UN’s high-level review of women, peace and security, the UK made eight global commitments on women, peace and security a year ago, many of which apply particularly to South Sudan and should be given real and active application in the country.

However, despite all those commitments and all that intent from the UK Government and others, the sad reality is that “business as usual” persists for women and girls in South Sudan, where the situation has now deteriorated well below even what might be called critical levels. More is needed from the international community to try to achieve some standard of wellbeing, and to try to underpin the safety and protection—and, of course, the empowerment and longer term protection—of women.

I have referred to the fact that a number of organisations that are very familiar with and engaged in South Sudan have issued good briefings. Not all of them have been able to give their name, because many of their operatives
are exposed and at risk, which tells us something about the scale of the problem. In fairness, it also shows us that the situation is difficult even for Government and international agency representatives working in that environment; that is all acknowledged.

Nevertheless, when it comes to addressing the humanitarian situation, we should not divorce that from the appalling human rights abuses that have taken place on all sides in South Sudan. The fact that they take place on all sides does not excuse them in any way, and it does not absolve the international community from its duty to try to hold people properly to account for them. The churches in South Sudan are clear that part of the reason for the destabilisation in South Sudan, and part of what has helped to eat at whatever passed for a moral fabric in that nation, is the fact that there was a sense of impunity and a lack of accountability. For people who want to live by good standards and ensure that others can live their life well, those things are hugely difficult and a source of scandal and frustration.

As well as highlighting the position of women and girls, I want to acknowledge the fact that, as we all know is the case in all conflict situations, there is the dire danger of a lost generation being created, as we see the crisis and the humanitarian need worsening. Given the impulse and the imperative to meet that need in the short term, we often forget some of the longer term consequences. I pay tribute to other all-party groups in the House, including the all-party group on global education for all, which has often made the point that that is not just about giving them their right to education, and it does not absolve the international community from its duty to try to hold people properly to account for them. The churches in South Sudan are clear that part of the reason for the destabilisation in South Sudan, and part of what has helped to eat at whatever passed for a moral fabric in that nation, is the fact that there was a sense of impunity and a lack of accountability. For people who want to live by good standards and ensure that others can live their life well, those things are hugely difficult and a source of scandal and frustration.

I have referred to a number of the briefings that exist. There were some very good points in the briefing that we received from World Vision, which perhaps other hon. Members might want to take up when they speak, of the worthy points in a number of those briefings, and I also look forward to hearing the response from all the Front-Bench spokespersons.

Several hon. Members rose——

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. I think there are four hon. Members who wish to speak. Looking at the time, without putting a formal time limit on speeches, that leaves about eight minutes each. If hon. Members could recognise that, it would give everyone a fair chance.

2.56 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Thank you so much, Mr. Betts, for calling me to speak; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

When I was the shadow International Development Secretary, one of the most dangerous things I ever did was to take a flight from Lokichoggio in northern Kenya to Juba and on to some of the villages in Southern Sudan that had been razed to the ground by the Janjaweed. I remember one thing so powerfully, which supports what the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), who has secured this debate, has just said. I met the women there and they said something that has never left me.

The women said—through an interpreter, obviously—that for 30 years they had had war in their country and they had no faith whatever in their male leaders to make peace, because their impression was that men liked fighting. With great respect to my all-male colleagues in the Chamber—they are all male bar one, my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Amanda Solloway)—I could not agree more that women need to be round the table making the peace.

It is so tragic to hear what is happening to this newly born country. After 30 years of civil war between the north and south in Sudan, one of the first new countries to come into existence recently has erupted into violence and is on the brink of genocide, if not already suffering it.

I have referred to the warnings that the United Nations special adviser has given. However, as the hon. Gentleman has said, just to read the reports of organisations such as Amnesty International—eye-witness reports of the human rights violations in South Sudan—requires a strong stomach, frankly. Mr Betts, if you will forgive me, I will place on the record the extent of the horror of what women in particular are suffering in South Sudan. Amnesty says that there were clearly “serious violations of international human rights”.

That was in July, during the violence then. People took refuge in United Nations sites, but they “faced the terror of being exposed to crossfire with shelters of plastic sheeting or mud as their only cover.”

Then, of course, it was the women—it always is—who had to leave the UN bases, or other safe places. Amnesty International’s report said:

“Over a roughly one-week period that began just after the fighting ended, dozens of Nuer women were systematically raped. Many were raped by more than one soldier. When they released me...my clothes were full of blood.”

I am sorry to have to read that into the record, but I do not think, standing here, we should baulk at just how bad the situation was. We should not be surprised that the response of those vulnerable people has been to flee. Some 3 million South Sudanese people—that is probably
a conservative estimate—have been displaced, and 90% of those fleeing are women and children. They are disproportionately affected. The present reality demands concrete action from the international community. I applaud what the Government have been doing, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman who secured the debate: we are going to need to do more.

In my short contribution, I want to keep my eyes focused on the ways forward and on how the international community can support effective peace. More remains to be done if peace is to prevail. The strategic focus must be on bringing the conflicting parties back to the negotiating table and ensuring that whatever agreement is agreed is fully implemented. I was particularly struck by what Dame Rosalind Marsden said about what is next for Sudan at the recent meeting of the all-party group for Sudan and South Sudan. She highlighted the key way forward to be an emphasis on political inclusivity. When looking to the future, we must ensure that all voices are heard. The international community must focus on calming the rhetoric in South Sudan and supporting grassroots reconciliation processes through the Churches, women’s groups and youth leaders.

I was struck by something that Bishop Eduardo Hibiros Kussala said, because I think it is directly relevant. He said:

“Many people in South Sudan are wounded in spirit. The pain of decades of war has not been addressed; our hard-won independence did not bring justice for the many who had suffered. No one has been convicted of crimes against humanity, and people have not been able to tell their stories, to relate what happened to them and their family members. Without reconciliation and forgiveness, our wounds will remain open.”

That is the point. Unless those things are addressed, peace will not take root and hold in that country.

Given the prevalence of Christianity throughout the country, Church leaders have a strong role to play. From its recent submission to the International Development Committee’s inquiry, I am aware that CAFOD has been focusing on the role of the Catholic Church and Church leaders as facilitators and promoters of the peace process. I know that the APG for Sudan and South Sudan met the South Sudan Council of Churches, which is perhaps the most promising Church-led reconciliation body in South Sudan. I am also told that it met with the Pope in Rome recently and is planning more ecumenical visits. I strongly commend the Church networks to the Minister and, through him, the Foreign Office. They are a way in which this country can help to bring about a secure peace.

In conclusion, I encourage the UK Government to increase their engagement with the Church. I like the phrase that the hon. Gentleman used. We need to create a coalition of hopeful purpose—something that will last for generations. Among all that, let us please make space for women’s contribution to peace-making.

3.3 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) for securing this important and timely debate and for his diligence on international humanitarian and human rights matters. It is a pleasure to speak after the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), who made a powerful speech.

The Department for International Development’s aid strategy was set out just over a year ago, and last week we had the publication of its bilateral and multilateral development reviews. What is clear in the strategy and the reviews is that in addressing poverty we also need to address conflict as a driver of and sometimes a consequence of poverty. In many ways, South Sudan is tragically a prime example of how the new aid strategy could be applied to good effect. The civil war that blights South Sudan today began almost exactly three years ago. Since then, we have seen numerous ceasefires brokered, the UN continues its peacekeeping programme in the region and a formal peace agreement, but none of those measures has succeeded in preventing the sustained violence that has already been described. In many ways, it is one of the least well publicised humanitarian crises of our time, which makes today’s debate especially welcome.

Even before South Sudan became a sovereign nation, the foundations for the new country were shaky. Decades of war in Sudan and across the region had caused widespread poverty, inequality and instability. The infrastructure needed to develop a new country was not there. That has made it incredibly difficult for humanitarian missions to deliver aid effectively to all parts of the country and it has held back the country’s economy.

The scale of the humanitarian crisis was set out fully by my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle in his opening speech. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that 1.87 million people have been internally displaced. As he said, more than 1 million people have fled to neighbouring countries to escape the violence. That equates to around one quarter of the population of the country having to uproot themselves and leave their homes because of the civil war. More than 200,000 people are living in UN protection of civilians sites.

As my hon. Friend said, food insecurity is a massive challenge. Almost 5 million people are food insecure in South Sudan. According to the World Food Programme and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, up to 4 million of them are severely food insecure, and the numbers are going up as a consequence of the conflict. As both speakers have said, DFID is playing an active and positive role, and I pay tribute to the role that the United Kingdom has been playing. DFID has been working in South Sudan since 2006 to try to address the humanitarian situation and establish the capacity for future development, including through the South Sudan peace building programme, the South Sudan recovery fund and the South Sudan service delivery programme. Crucially, there is also the support that we and others are providing to the refugees in neighbouring countries, including Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya. The UK is the second largest bilateral donor in South Sudan after the USA. The presence we have in South Sudan, despite the conflict and the challenges we face, is crucial.

I echo what my hon. Friend said about education and how vital it is that even in these challenging circumstances, the needs of children in South Sudan are not forgotten. As he said, it is vital that we do not have a lost generation. When the Minister responds, it would be good to hear about the programmes that the Government are supporting for education in South Sudan—particularly the education of girls and young women. We have seen a renewed global focus on education this year with the
launch of Education Cannot Wait, which looks at the needs of refugees and other people living in emergency situations. Last week, the International Development Committee, as part of our education inquiry, visited Jordan and Lebanon to see for ourselves the impact of the Syria conflict on the education of children and young people in those countries—both the refugees and those from the host communities.

Despite the great efforts of Governments, including our own, we know there have been extraordinary violations of human rights, as my hon. Friend set out so powerfully in his opening speech. Can the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to monitor and report human rights violations? In particular, when such violations arise, how are we going to bring the perpetrators to justice? As has been said, the UN Secretary-General’s special adviser on genocide, Adama Dieng, has already given stark warnings about the risk of genocide. What are the Government doing with partners to ensure that the situation does not become a genocide? What representations are we making to the South Sudanese Government? There is, as the right hon. Member for Meriden said, a shared responsibility. That continent had the Rwanda genocide in 1994 and the conflict in Darfur more recently, and it is vital that we learn lessons as a country from such events.

At the height of the conflict, DFID and the Foreign Office had to limit staffing numbers in the country for understandable reasons. Can the Minister tell us whether he sees a point at which the Government will be able to restore some of the reductions in DFID and other staff working to relieve the humanitarian crisis faced by the people of South Sudan? We know that many NGOs have similarly had to reduce their staffing numbers. For example, Médecins sans Frontières told the International Development Committee of the ongoing security risk faced by its hospitals and other humanitarian outposts. In written evidence to the Committee, it told us that during the most recent surge in violence, two of MSF’s clinics in Leer were looted and they have not been able to reopen because of the ongoing insecurity. What can we do as a country and what are the Government doing in conjunction with other multilateral donors to ensure the safety of humanitarian staff working in the region?

My hon. Friend the Member for Foyle set out some of the concerns and issues with UNMISS in the region. Reports have raised serious concerns. I have been told of a recent incident at the Terrain hotel. The UN peacekeeping mission was only a few miles away from the hotel and yet it failed repeatedly to respond to emergency calls from civilians. As has already been said, UNMISS has struggled to fulfil its mandate for a number of reasons, but lack of co-operation from the Government of South Sudan is a major factor. Does the Minister think there is more that we could do, perhaps via the United Nations Security Council, to raise these questions?

Finally, as with all conflicts of this nature, in the end we need a diplomatic political solution that brings peace. I ask the Minister what more can be done to bring an end to this conflict through diplomatic means. Next Tuesday the International Development Committee will take oral evidence on the situation in South Sudan, including from the Minister. I very much welcome today’s debate and look forward to hearing contributions from others. Members and the responses from the Minister, the SNP Front Bench and my own Front Bench. As my hon. Friend said, we face a number of challenges that relate to human rights and justice, and a fragile young country that desperately needs a peaceful, diplomatic solution.

3.11 pm

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con):

It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg); I am reassured that the issue is receiving the attention of not only the all-party parliamentary group for Sudan and South Sudan, but also that of the Select Committee. I am an Afro-optimist, but I must admit there is very little to be optimistic about in South Sudan, which is perhaps one of the reasons why we should engage in the subject. I sometimes wonder about the anecdote of the MP who says, “I did something about this; I spoke about it in the House of Commons”; the constituent reminds them that that does not in itself effect change.

As I have gone from country to country in Africa, I have occasionally read in the local papers about proceedings in our Chamber—the references and the criticisms. They are taken seriously. I would very much like the Minister, through our ambassador in Juba or through Christopher Trott, our special representative for Sudan and South Sudan, to take a copy of Hansard and to say to Riek Machar or Salva Kiir, “The ex-Minister for Africa, James Duddridge, was not happy.” Let them see the support that their citizens have from us here in the House of Commons.

All too often in meetings, Kiir and the President seemed to be more interested in their own political future and dividing up the cake. I remember a farcical argument about who did which Cabinet jobs, and it became apparent that the Cabinet jobs with lots of cash flowing through were the ones of interest. It was the personal and financial interest of those involved that drove things forward.

I am not going to be particularly diplomatic. My private office always reminded me as a Minister, “You are the first diplomat.” This was when they gave me a lecture on being more diplomatic. The worst Foreign Minister I met in my two years was Barnaba Benjamin, who, thankfully, has now been sacked. He was oblivious to the need for a proper dialogue and change. I am not sure about the degree to which he was authorised on behalf of the Government to take such a position in the UN, but we are certainly in a better position without him.

Festus Mogae, the ex-President of Botswana, was a strong influence when I was dealing with the situation, but he was heavily under-resourced. I urge the excellent Minister to have discussions with his Foreign Office colleagues to make sure Festus Mogae gets all the resources he needs. A few thousand pounds to fly the right people to the right location to chat or paying the hotel bill for a few nights for the right people might sound trivial, but it can be transformational in its effect.

The Chair of the Select Committee referred to infrastructure problems and physically getting around the country. One looks at a map, but the roads are
impassable physically or impassable because of the security situation. One cannot get around unless one flies into regional airports.

There is also a broader infrastructure problem. The international community got it disastrously wrong when South Sudan was declared an independent nation state. The international community, including the UK Government, felt that if certain building blocks were provided, a principal one being an election, everything would sort itself out. When I was in Juba meeting people from civil society, they said, “What you do not appreciate is that everything has been stripped away. Everything that you consider normal in the community—the checks, the balances, the free press, the local councils, the parish councils, and, to a degree, even the churches—have been eliminated.” We should reflect on that in other situations.

I remember, bizarrely, South Sudan taking a great interest in the Scottish referendum, and I realised why. They did not want Scotland to be independent, simply because they would no longer be the newest nation state in the world. They were vehement in their opposition. There was an undertone of pride about being a new nation state. There was hope and drive there. It was very strange. When I visited, the IMF was due to arrive. The situation seemed wholly farcical. The economy was in total collapse and the support of the IMF would have made sense only if the Government system was sorted. I am interested to find out how that has developed.

In the UN camps, I visited women who had been raped—some in the camps themselves, but principally outside the camps. I was struck by what I heard. I had been told to expect graphic stories of how they had been raped so that I would appreciate the horror of the situation. However, none of them wanted to discuss that—not because I was a man, but because they were used to politicians coming in and listening. They knew that I was meeting Salva Kiir the next day and they had specific policy recommendations: “You need to tell our President this; you need to tell our President that.” They clearly felt totally disenfranchised.

At the UN I met two female British police officers. I am interested to know whether the secondment of UK police forces to the camps is still working. That was really useful because people were getting raped in the camps. The UN camps were relatively porous and people could get in and out. The police officers helped the community to police themselves. They acted almost as police trainers to the community, rather than policing the area themselves.

We should learn lessons from when people come back together. When Machar came back to Juba, he brought bodyguards, which, given the history, makes a lot of sense. I suggested that some should come early to pave the way so that there were no misunderstandings among the combatant forces. I expected two, maybe 10, maybe 20, bodyguards—there were 1,000. I am no military man, but that sounds more like a battalion than close protection officers.

There was a bizarre debate over whether we should transport the rocket-propelled machinery. We ended up helping to bring back some of the rocket-propelled devices, but not the actual cartridges that go in them. Indeed, when things unravelled, it was among the bodyguards that things started around the presidential compound.

We need to look at the situation in relation to Sudan more generally. It is good that the all-party group is covering both areas, particularly the Chinese relationship and the oil relationship. When looking at the numbers, it struck me that there did not seem to be any economic sense in pumping oil and sending it to China. I could not quite work out why it was economic to do that, unless there were big bribes going on behind the scenes, separate from the flows to China.

This was one of the two areas, the other being Burundi, that, despite my being an Afrophile and Afro-optimist, kept me up at night. I do not know what one could have done differently, but I hope that those places still keep some at the Foreign Office up at night—I am sure they do. With all due respect, I hope they occasionally keep the Minister up at night, looking at what we can do for the people of South Sudan, as well as those who have left it and its neighbouring countries.

3.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) on his presentation of the issue and the hard work that he has done on it. I also congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. They have made fantastic and focused contributions, and they clearly have much more knowledge than I do and have had experience in South Sudan.

It will be of no surprise to many here that I am taking part in the debate. Humanitarian situations have always touched me, and this one does too. As we are in this place and can use our influence to make changes that help people, that is what we should do. That is why I shall continue to speak in such debates. If we can help, clearly we should—that is where I am coming from. We have received a lot of information from many people, including the briefing pack that the hon. Member for Foyle mentioned. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, and I want to make some comments on that issue and human rights.

The briefing pack states that close to 3 million South Sudanese have had to flee their homes since civil war broke out in December 2013. An estimated 1.87 million people have been internally displaced, and more than 1 million people are refugees in neighbouring countries. We are witnessing a humanitarian catastrophe in South Sudan, and those figures cannot be overlooked as we try to grasp the enormity of it. It is estimated that 4.8 million people were food-insecure in July 2016. If that is not a crisis, then what is? When a ceasefire was declared in July, after five days of heavy fighting that marked the fifth anniversary of the formation of the world’s youngest nation, I was shocked at some of the images and the coverage. It showed that despite the ceasefire, which followed days of devastating fighting, a humanitarian emergency gripped the nation. Untold numbers were massacred and thousands more sought refuge in churches. People rush to churches in the hope of finding sanctuary—as they should, because that is where sanctuary should be. Unfortunately, that did not save them either. The humanitarian issue is the most urgent, starting with the lack of drinking water. The International Red Cross has managed to send teams into the two main hospitals, but it is beyond time for Governments worldwide to step in and do what they can.
Many Christians have lost their lives in the civil war, although it is not possible to give the number. I want to ask the Minister about that. In this House I have a duty to be clear about it, as do other Members. Reports suggested that some 300 people, including scores of civilians, were killed in the violence in July, and there were UN reports of horrors such as mass rapes, and children and the disabled being burned alive. Can we even begin to imagine how horrible those things are? Words cannot take it in. The UN said in its report earlier this year that it had received “harrowing accounts of pro-opposition civilians killed by being burned alive, suffocated in containers, shot, hanged from trees or cut to pieces”.

There were stories of children and disabled people being among such victims. No one is free from the depravity, violence and brutality of the people involved. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, said at the time: “The scale and types of sexual violence—primarily by Government SPLA forces and affiliated militia—are described in searing, devastating detail, as is the almost casual, yet calculated, attitude of those slaughtering civilians and destroying property and livelihoods.”

More recently, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned that there was a “very real risk of mass atrocities” in South Sudan and that peacekeepers deployed in the war-torn country would not be able to stop such a bloodbath.

The people who reside in South Sudan have suffered a painful history, enduring years of conflict. Today, the humanitarian situation has again reached the most deplorable levels. There have been reports, as other hon. Members have said, of the rape of women and girls on an unprecedented scale. In response to the very careful words of the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), who clearly outlined the situation of violence against women, I would say that all of us here are speaking out against it too. I find it incomprehensible when I try to take in all that is happening.

The current circumstances seem a far cry from the formation of the transitional constitution, which provided some positivity about the direction the country could have taken. It even included a stipulation on the separation of religion and state, prohibiting religious discrimination even if the President declares a state of emergency. The emphasis in South Sudan at the start was excellent, but those clear principles have been strayed away from. It is common for rights of that type to be enshrined in law in developed nations. The statement that “all religions shall be treated equally” and that “religion or religious beliefs shall not be used for divisive purposes” indicated much potential. Tragically, however, such promising rhetoric has failed to be fully realised because of the continuing conflict. Instead, a process of ethnic cleansing has gripped the country, involving massacres, starvation and the destruction of villages. Members will know that South Sudan is one of the most diverse countries in Africa, with approximately 64 different ethnic groups brought together as one. Sadly, the three UN commission members say they have observed deepening divisions between the groups, which may lead to an increase in violence if urgent action is not taken to de-escalate tensions.

Large parts of the country have no functioning courts or even traditional reconciliation methods, and that is exacerbating issues and affecting the potential for peace. Developing the judicial infrastructure of the country is therefore of the utmost importance and must be addressed. Other institutions that can help to create a path to peace should also be supported. For instance, the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust has heard of the positive role of the Churches as long-term mediators—which they should, can and want to be—and an influence for reconciliation. As the Minister of State, Baroness Anelay, has said:

“Both accountability and reconciliation remain essential for South Sudan to move forward”,

and it is imperative that we support “the ongoing efforts of community groups, including churches, to pursue reconciliation at the local level.”

I believe that they are a conduit for change and reconciliation. Considering that, will the Minister ensure that our embassy officials discuss the importance of religious communities in the country and the role they can play in peace and reconciliation as well as in offering refuge to innocent civilians who desperately need it? As the UN commission has said:

“The stage is being set for a repeat of what happened in Rwanda and the international community is”—as we all believe—“under an obligation to prevent it.”

The idea of the separation of states was to stop genocide, yet it continues unabated. We have a moral duty to do all we can to halt the genocide taking place right under our noses.

The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) is right that it is good to be able to say he has spoken in this debate in Westminster Hall, but it is not enough. We who are speaking are not the ones who can make a change. We look to the Government and the Minister to take our words and drive them into a strategy and plan for change. I have read the response of the Department for International Development, which has said:

“The UK is the second largest bilateral donor to the humanitarian response in South Sudan. We expect to provide assistance to 3 million people between 2015 and 2020, the majority of whom are internally displaced people, but also those living in the host communities supporting them. Our support will include life-saving food and clean drinking water as well as sanitation, shelter and health care.”

All that is good, but it is not sufficient to plaster up the bleeding without attempting to deal with the assault that causes it. With that in mind, will the Minister reassure the House that Her Majesty’s Government are doing all that they can—not just alone but with other Governments—to prevent further conflict in South Sudan and support the efforts for a peace process to end the violence?

3.29 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) on obtaining the debate and on his comprehensive introduction to it, as well as all the other hon. Members who have made
informed and important contributions. I congratulate him on his work as the chair of the all-party group for Sudan and South Sudan, of which I am proud to be a vice-chair. It has been a huge privilege for the all-party group. We have welcomed a number of delegations and representatives as part of a continuing inquiry into the situation in Sudan and South Sudan. Recently, I had the honour of meeting representatives of the Sudan Council of Churches, led by the Archbishop of Canterbury’s former and current advisers on Anglican communion affairs, Bishop Precious Omuku and the Right Reverend Anthony Poggo, Bishop of Kajo-Keji, who is from South Sudan. The role of the Church has been touched on, and I may come back to that.

The repeated message from those visitors, and from the reports prepared for the debate, is just how dire the situation is on the ground. That is particularly tragic given the hope that surrounded independence in 2011. South Sudan remains the youngest country in the world—despite our best efforts in 2014, although the situations are of course markedly different on a whole range of levels.

We have heard the words “tragic”, “dire” and “gruelling”—we are almost running out of words to express the tragedy of the situation, yet many analysts say there is no end in sight. In particular, the issue of gender-based violence has been touched on. We are in the middle of the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. Saturday of this week is Human Rights Day. Tomorrow there will be a debate on violence against women, and next Friday there will be a private Member’s Bill on the Istanbul convention. Those are supposed to be reminders to galvanise us into action, yet the situation only seems to be getting worse.

The constructive suggestion from the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) about the role that women have to play in the peace process is important and worth emphasising, and that has to be built into all the diplomatic and humanitarian responses. The former Minister, the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), emphasised that point in recounting his experience of meeting with women.

The whole country is affected by the humanitarian disaster. Some 1.87 million people are internally displaced and nearly half the population are food-insecure. There are increasing health risks, such as cholera, which the hon. Member for Foyle mentioned. There are attacks on non-governmental organisations and humanitarian organisations—organisations that are there on a humanitarian basis, trying to provide help on the ground—such as the attack on the Terrain compound. There is also an increasing tribal dimension and a real risk of mass atrocities, as identified by the UN Secretary-General.

There has to be some hope for progress. There is a role for the Government, which we have touched on, and the role of faith-based and Church organisations has been mentioned frequently. The Church has historically played an important role in building peace after previous conflicts. It has a reach into communities across the whole country and, crucially, is owned and led by leaders from those communities. The particular interest that Pope Francis has taken in the situation has been mentioned, so it would be interesting to know how the Government are working with the Church on the ground.

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Given the UK’s role in the troika, is there any role that the UK’s representative to the Holy See can play, or is playing, in helping to facilitate those dialogues?

We have a Department for International Development. Minister here today, and I echo the points made by the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), about DFID’s support, and particularly about continuity of education for children so that future generations do not get wrapped up in a cycle of violence, and about the importance of working through NGOs on the ground. The humanitarian “Charter for Change”, which a number of organisations have signed up to, such as the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development and the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, emphasises that support for organisations already on the ground is important, especially as access for external organisations becomes more difficult.

In providing a humanitarian response, it is important that we do not lose sight of longer-term development work supporting livelihoods, the mainstreaming of peacebuilding and finding ways to link that with humanitarian responses to build resilience in communities going forward.

With regard to influence at the United Nations, it would be useful to know where the Government stand on pushing for an arms embargo as a matter of urgency. The UK’s ambassador has called for that, but how is the UK proactively working to identify what blocks there might be to that at the UN? Is there a role for increased sanctions against not just military figures but high-level civilian and political figures? There has to be continued pressure on both sides to get back to the negotiating table to implement a ceasefire and allow humanitarian access. There has to be discussion with neighbouring countries and support for displaced people in refugee camps on the borders as well.

There also has to be support here at home in the UK. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office advises against all travel of UK citizens to South Sudan, yet I struggled to find on the Home Office website any country guidance about how South Sudanese refugees who make it here should be treated. I hope they will be welcomed and supported to settle in this country, given the challenges that they have faced and made it through.

As the hon. Member for Foyle said, nothing should be too difficult or too intractable for us. We sometimes wonder where these debates get us. I hope that diplomats will take this strong demonstration of cross-party support very clearly and that the Government will be encouraged by that. If they step up their action, they will have our support.

3.35 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) for securing this very important debate. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group, he has a considerable interest in the issue. In his very passionate contribution, he rightly pointed out the serious human rights violations and, in particular, the disproportionate impact on women and girls. I also thank the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), the Chair of the International Development Committee, as well as the hon. Members for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady).
It is clear that Members from all parties are alarmed by the rapidly deteriorating situation in South Sudan and have grave worries that the country could fall further still, with new reports of violence against civilians every day. Despite several ceasefires, what we are seeing unfold in South Sudan does not show the country moving towards a more peaceful period. We must work closely with our international partners and, crucially, the African community to stabilise the situation in the country. We therefore wish to seek assurances from the Government that the UK is doing all that it can to alleviate the growing humanitarian crisis in South Sudan. Time does not permit me to cover the many issues of equal importance that hon. Members have raised. I will concentrate on three areas of concern.

The first issue is the sheer scale of the refugee crisis being created by the conflict, with 1.3 million South Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries and more than 1.7 million internally displaced. For a country with a population of between 11 and 12 million, let us be in no doubt that this is a huge figure, with more than one in five people fleeing their homes. It is very worrying because the most dramatic manifestation of a deteriorating humanitarian situation is the scale of the movement of people. The mass movement taking place in South Sudan paints not only a bleak picture of the situation, but an extremely disturbing one. It is clear that alarm bells in the international community should be ringing loudly, for this situation is only set to get worse.

The second focus of our concern is the enormous funding shortfalls experienced by UN agencies operating in the region, something that has not been talked about as much today but which is very important. For example, of the almost $650 million that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees needs for the South Sudan situation, it has only managed to secure $166 million, or 26% of its funding requirements, which leaves a $483 million funding gap. Although I welcome the UK’s $6.5 million contribution to the UNHCR South Sudan situation fund, it seems that our international partners are less than willing, with even the International Olympic Committee contributing more than Italy or Spain. That is frankly unacceptable. We need not only to up our game and contribute more to this neglected crisis, but to get on the phone, get around the table and press our allies to step up and plug the gap.

Supporting refugees, which is vital if we are to address the humanitarian situation that the South Sudanese face, can happen only with adequate funding. Without funding, it is a struggle to register new arrivals, provide shelter, relocate refugees to better, safer sites, provide access to food, increase health services, and provide water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. Not providing those things deepens the humanitarian crisis, as we are seeing. The UK and its partners urgently need to address that gap, particularly as we enter the dry season, when large offensives that will displace more people are expected. I urge the Minister to provide some clarity on that point.

The third and final issue, which has rightly been the subject of most of the focus of this important debate, is the human rights situation in the country. Numerous abuses—including, as we have heard, sexual violence, rape and the use of child soldiers—have been committed against civilians. Most worryingly, as hon. Members said, there is a real concern that the conflict could escalate into ethnic cleansing and genocide. In 2010, the US director of national intelligence warned that a new genocide is likely to occur in South Sudan. It is with deep regret that we are beginning to see his prediction come true, as the situation becomes less a conflict between Government and rebel forces, and more one between armed militia and defenceless civilians. Human Rights Watch reported that soldiers and police forces are conducting house-to-house searches for certain ethnic groups, followed by multiple killings, despite ceasefires being in place.

The chair of the three-person commission in South Sudan, acting on behalf of the UN Commission on Human Rights, stated that they are observing deepening ethnic divisions, and that the stage is being set for a repeat of the Rwandan genocide. In the 1990s, the world stood by and watched as the Tutsi people of Rwanda were not just killed but exterminated in swathes of that country. We cannot let that happen again. To prevent that, we must ensure that the failures associated with UNMISS are properly addressed and that there is accountability and a working justice system. I have substantial reservations about UNMISS’s ability to protect civilians, in the wake of an investigation that identified an ineffective response to violence and a risk-averse posture. I would be grateful if the Minister can tell me what the UK is doing to ensure, when the mission’s mandate and budget are extended, that its shortcomings are corrected and that it is able to properly protect civilians.

On the issue of justice and accountability, although I understand that DFID is funding several access-to-justice programmes in South Sudan, the criminal justice system in that country is not only still grossly under-resourced, but lacks the capacity in several important areas to see through investigations and prosecutions. What are the Government doing to support efforts to bring those guilty of atrocities to justice? What are they doing more widely to prevent genocide, particularly through arms embargoes and their enforcement?

Although the world’s attention is rightly focused on the growing refugee crisis in Syria and Iraq, we must remember that other crises are emerging around the globe, many of which are as serious. We must take the humanitarian situation and the rising spectre of genocide in South Sudan seriously, and we must not let it take hold or stand by if it does.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Wharton): It is testament to the importance of this issue and the weight that Members attach to it that we have had such a wide range of contributions to the debate from across political parties. I congratulate the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) on raising this issue.

There is a very difficult set of circumstances in South Sudan. It is a sad and, indeed, tragic story. Hon. Members spoke about a range of concerns and issues, which I hope to address in the time remaining. I will explain the British Government’s position, what the UK is doing to try to mitigate the impact of what is unfolding in South Sudan, and what we might do, looking to the future, to set that country on a better path—one that has eluded it thus far.
The hon. Gentleman set out the situation in South Sudan in stark terms. It voted overwhelmingly for independence in 2011, but in 2013 fighting broke out between the forces loyal to President Kiir and those loyal to the Vice-President Machar. A peace agreement was signed in August 2015, but fighting broke out again in Juba in July, and Vice-President Machar fled the country. Estimates of the number of people killed in the fighting since 2013 range from 50,000 to 300,000, but it cannot be denied that a significant number have been impacted by the effects of the instability and fighting. Many lives have been destroyed, and many others remain in the balance. The question, which right hon. and hon. Members have covered widely, is, what can we do to assist?

Some hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Foyle, spoke about UNMISS—the UN peacekeeping force of 13,000 or so troops, to which the UK is scaling up its contribution to 400 to assist it in its work. They mentioned the challenges it has faced and the criticism it has come under as a result of its perceived failings. It is right to be critical of its failings, but we also have to recognise that the Government of South Sudan have often been a very significant factor in preventing it from doing its job. That is one of the challenges that we face as an international community when engaging in South Sudan, and we are continuing work to try to resolve it. The UK’s increased contribution of some of the world’s most professional soldiers, who will be able to provide additional leadership and support, will hopefully make a difference, but that will not remove a number of the barriers and challenges, not the least of which is the behaviour of the Government of South Sudan.

The hon. Gentleman and a number of other right hon. and hon. Members raised issues including the challenges that women and girls face, and the important contribution that the UK, in particular, is making in the field of education in South Sudan. He commented on reports from a range of organisations that have taken an interest in this space and contributed significantly to the broader understanding of what is happening and what needs to be done.

The hon. Gentleman and others also raised the concern that there is a perception that some have acted with impunity, and have committed crimes and done things that, in some cases, we find entirely unacceptable, but have not yet been brought to justice. The peace agreement signed in 2015 agreed that a hybrid court would be established to bring to justice those guilty of the most egregious human rights abuses. The African Union is currently considering models for it, and our international partners are encouraging it to move it forward. Those who have committed or are complicit in serious crimes should and indeed must be brought to justice, not just because it is important that the victims of those crimes have justice, but for the message it sends to the international community more broadly about the approach that the UK and the international community take in the world. We will stick firm and fast to that approach and encourage our partners and other nations to co-operate in delivering it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) spoke of the tragic circumstances in South Sudan and quoted moving parts of Amnesty International’s report. She focused on the impact on individuals—particularly women and girls—and commented. I think appropriately, on the need to bring parties around the table, and on the role that the Church and church leaders can play in that process. Those comments were echoed by the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), among others. We recognise the important role that civil society can play in peace building, including in South Sudan, and Members highlighted the role that churches can play. We are working with them to find ways to support action for peace—the Churches’ campaign—and we are working closely with the churches, including through our ambassador to the Holy See, whom hon. Members mentioned, Bishop Anthony Poggo and Bishop Precious Omuku.

We are engaging with church leaders and supporting Churches’ objectives and broader activities. The Churches can play a key role in bringing together some of the groups that will need to be brought together if we are to secure peace for South Sudan. We stand ready to work in tandem with any actors in this space who can help us to achieve our shared objectives, and the Churches have a proud history and tradition of doing that. That has been recognised by right hon. and hon. Members today and, I can assure them, is recognised by the Government.

In one guise or another, I seem to appear before the Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), daily at the moment, which is testament to his work ethic and interests. He drew on his wide and comprehensive experience and understanding of some of the broader challenges, including the need to address conflict when we wish to deal with poverty. The Department for International Development focuses very much on alleviating poverty, and rightly so, but we have to recognise that the underlying causes of poverty can be many and varied, and conflict is one of the strongest, most easily identifiable and most challenging to address.

I was struck, too, by the fact that the Select Committee Chair raised the issue of neighbouring countries, demonstrating his grasp of the breadth of the challenge, which affects not only South Sudan but its neighbours. In this financial year we will spend £15 million in Uganda, nearly £4 million in Ethiopia and more than £3 million in Kenya on support for refugees from South Sudan. More needs to be done, because of the significant pressure on neighbouring states from the large numbers of people who have been forced by circumstances entirely beyond their control to flee their homes, often in fear of their lives or in search of basic amenities, provisions and support. The impact on neighbouring states is significant, and the hon. Gentleman was right to mention it. We are cognisant of it and engaged. Where we can, we are determined to contribute not only to finding peace in South Sudan, but to helping its affected neighbours deal with the consequences of the unfolding events.

The Chair of the Select Committee also raised the issue of education. I am pleased to confirm that the UK is a lead donor to education in South Sudan. We recognise its importance, particularly for girls, but also more broadly. “Girls’ Education South Sudan”, is our £47.4 million programme running from May 2013 to April 2019. It will benefit 240,000 girls, as well as boys, and more than 2,500 schools, resulting in improved learning outcomes and completion rates and helping to minimise the disruption of the terrible circumstances in...
which many young people find themselves. I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that important point, which deserved mention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) drew on his extensive experience of Africa generally and South Sudan in particular. He is free of some of the constraints that affect those of us in ministerial office, and was able to be slightly less diplomatic than I might choose to be in this debate, but I recognise the importance of his comments. He is right: what we say in the Chamber is not the same as what we do and how we act, but people follow what is said in this place and the mood, thoughts and concerns of hon. Members. He has made his views very clear.

From my own travels and people I have met in Africa, I know that my hon. Friend’s time as a Minister in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is respected, and the weight attached to his comments is not insignificant. I therefore hope that actors in this place will heed his words, because they are both wise and important, and they send a clear message to those who, if they changed their actions, might make a real and direct difference to the lives of many people in South Sudan.

My hon. Friend asked specific questions about the IMF. I understand the surprise he expressed about it, and I confirm that the process is on hold given the situation in South Sudan. He also asked about the contribution of the UK police to improving the security situation. I am sorry to confirm that, the crisis having re-emerged, the policewomen whom he met—or their replacements—were withdrawn in July. We have not been able to restart that process because of the particular security risks.

The hon. Member for Strangford talked about the need for basic amenities and the challenges for South Sudan. Basic infrastructure is often not present, which makes delivering aid, doing good, monitoring progress and doing all the things that the international community wants to do in that country all the more difficult. He rightly spoke about the terrible impact on many Christian communities. He is a champion for Christian communities throughout the world—this is not the first debate in which I have heard him raise the issue—and his voice is strong and clear. I hope that it will be heeded. People, whatever their background, are suffering in South Sudan, and that includes many minority groups. Christians are suffering much as a result of broader events and, given the role of the Churches, and the clear and urgent need for the international community to rally to do what can be done to avert what might be a crisis in the country, his comments were timely and apposite. I welcome them.

The hon. Gentleman’s comments were echoed to some extent by the spokesman for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Glasgow North, who also asked about our actions and activities at the United Nations, as did the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). At the United Nations, we continue to call for an arms embargo and to be proactive in our support, engaging with our international partners in that space. We recognise the challenges in delivering unified, global international action in such circumstances, but that is no excuse for not trying to secure it. The UK plays a lead role in that, which I welcome, and it will continue to do so, which is important.

The shadow Minister focused on three areas, which I have already touched on to a great extent. He spoke about the scale of the refugee crisis, which is not only in South Sudan but in its neighbouring countries, and recognised the need for serious action to deal with it. The UK plays a significant role, but I accept that there is more to do. He rightly spoke about funding shortfalls. I have lobbied my counterparts in other donor nations by phone, and I will continue to engage in that space. The UK is the second largest humanitarian donor, in particular through our humanitarian and resilience programme in South Sudan—the £443 million HARISS programme, running over five years from March 2015 to 2020. We will provide food, shelter, access to water and health services to millions of vulnerable people, including women and children. We want our global partners to assist in the process, too—many do, but more needs to be done. His comments were important in that regard.

The shadow Minister also mentioned his concern about the escalating violence. Reference has been made to the concerns expressed by the United Nations, and many hon. Members referred to the danger of genocide in South Sudan. As is broadly accepted, however, we are not in that place at this time, although we are in a place where genocide is a very real risk. The international community must pay heed to that risk and take the warning. It must act and engage constructively and energetically to avoid what could become something that we look back on as a scar on our conscience if we are not careful about how we act today.

The UK is playing a key role by leading our international partners, investing through the Department for International Development, applying pressure through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, working through many agencies based here in this country or supported from here, and expressing its views and concerns through forums such as this one in Westminster Hall. We must continue to do all that and to focus our efforts, because the lives of many millions of people may hang on our success or otherwise. The goal and its pursuit are worthy, and I am pleased to see the House engage in that, across parties, as wholeheartedly as has been demonstrated this afternoon.

3.57 pm

Mark Durkan: I thank the Minister for replying to so many of the points made by many right hon. and hon. Members. I thank the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and the hon. Members for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for their contributions. They all articulated a number of the issues and factors to do with the existing problems in South Sudan and the possible actions to mitigate some of them in the short and the long term.

The Minister rightly touched on a number of the points that were made, and he acknowledged the problems with UNMISS, as did other hon. Members. I would not wish UNMISS to escape any criticism, but I did not want the debate only to focus on it and its failure.
We must remember that UNMISS failed not only the people of South Sudan but the very good people of the NGOs who had made a commitment there. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby mentioned the Terrain hotel incident, which involved NGO people being victimised. We should offer solidarity and sympathy to NGO workers who have had to leave South Sudan, perhaps for their own safety, or who have been evicted more cruelly. It must be hugely frustrating for them, knowing the problems of the country, to be denied the opportunity to add their bit of capacity.

The other people to whom we must of course offer solidarity are the people of South Sudan themselves. Emma Fanning from Oxfam, when she spoke to the APPG, made the point that it is the resilience of the South Sudanese people, in offering solidarity themselves, to which we have to pay tribute.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

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### UN’s Not Too Young to Run Campaign

4 pm

**Stuart Blair Donaldson** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): I beg to move, That this House has considered the UN’s Not Too Young to Run campaign.

That this House has considered the UN’s Not Too Young to Run campaign.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. Today’s generation of young people is the largest the world has ever known. Half of the global population is under the age of 30, yet young people are starkly under-represented at virtually every level of government and politics. Efforts have been made around the world to promote young people’s right to run for public office by seeking to lower the legal age of candidacy.

In 2007, as a result of the “How old is old enough?” campaign, the minimum candidacy age in England, Wales and Scotland was lowered from 21 to 18, in line with the voting age. In Turkey, young people lobbied the Government to reduce the age of candidacy for Parliament from 30 to 25. In Nigeria, the Not Too Young to Run campaign has embarked on a mission to address age discrimination in candidacy for the legislative and executive branches. That serves as an inspiration for the global campaign.

Building on the not too young run—I need to get that right; I am going to be saying it a lot. The global Not Too Young to Run campaign will focus on promoting young people’s right to run for public office. The campaign, launched by a partnership of the office of the UN Secretary-General’s envoy on youth, the UN Development Programme, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the European Youth Forum and the Youth Initiative for Advocacy Growth and Advancement, aims to elevate the promotion of young people’s right to run for public office and address widespread age discrimination.

Launching the campaign, the UN Secretary-General’s envoy on youth, Ahmad Alhendawi, said:

“Young people have every right to be active participants in civic and public life and it is time to ensure they no longer face arbitrary barriers to run for public office—whether at the local, regional or national level...Through the Not Too Young To Run campaign, my office will work with partners around the world to raise awareness about the issue of age discrimination and promote and expand the rights of young people to run for public office.”

In a rapidly changing world where more than 50% of people but fewer than 2% of elected legislators are under 30, the campaign highlights that young people’s active participation in electoral politics is essential to thriving and representative democracies worldwide. The campaign emphasises young people’s rights to engage fully in the democratic process, including their right to run for office.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has said:

“Younger generations are not adequately represented in formal political institutions such as Parliaments, political parties and public administrations. This leads many to feel leadership and policymaking are reserved for an élite. A society that does not fully respect everyone’s equal right to participate is fundamentally unsound. The right to express opinions—including criticism—and to participate in public affairs are essential to ensuring state institutions are accountable, grounded in service to the people.”
Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and, how, eloquent as ever, he is setting out his case. Does he agree that institutions such as the Scottish Youth Parliament and the UK Youth Parliament provide fantastic opportunities for young people to project themselves and have an experience of electoral office that stands them in good stead?

Stuart Blair Donaldson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I will come to the benefits of the Scottish and UK Youth Parliaments a little later.

The Secretary-General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Martin Chungong, has said:

“If young people are not too young to get married, to serve in the military or to choose the parliamentarians who will represent them, are they Not Too Young To Run…IPU calls for the age at which people may run for political office to be aligned with the legally permitted voting age. IPU Member Parliaments agreed to this in 2010 when they adopted a resolution on youth participation in the democratic process. If more young MPs were elected, there would be more role models from whom young people could take their lead and engage in politics. The time has come to increase youth representation in politics and we are happy to join forces with the United Nations Envoy on Youth in this endeavor.

The campaign will gather inputs and ideas from young people around the world through a series of online activities and engagement, while providing a platform and resources for national campaigns to flourish.

If I may quote one more person, I should say that I was particularly taken with this quote from Johanna Nyman, President of the European Youth Forum:

“Young people bring the fresh ideas and innovation to politics that are sorely needed! In an era when young people are turning away from traditional politics, we must all work together to increase youth participation in politics and to encourage political parties to welcome younger candidates and young people to run for political office.”

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I likewise congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that part of young people’s enthusiasm and engagement comes from their right to vote? The Scottish independence referendum was one of the best demonstrations of that. We welcome the fact that 16-year-olds can now vote in Scottish local authority elections; it is just disappointing that they were not able to do so in the European referendum and that they cannot vote in Westminster parliamentary elections.

Stuart Blair Donaldson: I absolutely agree, and I will come to that point too. My hon. Friends must have copies of my speech.

Johanna Nyman continued:

“If the last few months of global political upheaval have taught us anything, it should be that politics needs young people more than ever and that young people do care passionately about the decisions made about their future.”

On behalf of the Scottish National party, I welcome this UN campaign, which raises awareness of the need to get more young people involved in politics. We share the UN’s wish to inspire young people to run for office, vote and engage in politics. As has been mentioned, Scotland values young people’s involvement in politics, and our independence referendum was a great movement for young people. With the power to legislate for that referendum in September 2014, the Scottish Parliament enabled 16 and 17-year-olds to vote. Turnout in that referendum among people aged 16 or 17 who were able to vote for the first time, 66% of whom it is estimated registered to vote, was 75%.

Following the positive experience of that referendum, calls grew for the voting age to be lowered across the UK. Speaking at a press conference on 19 September, the First Minister of Wales said that high youth turnout proved that teenagers cared about politics. He said:

“How often do we have discussions bemoaning the fact that young people don’t vote…That didn’t happen yesterday. The case has been made much more strongly for 16 and 17-year-olds to get the vote more generally in elections across the UK.”

I cite the independence referendum as one of the main reasons why I am here. The grassroots nature of the campaign allowed young people such as me to take ownership of ideas and get involved in politics. For me, it meant going out in all weathers to knock on doors right across what is now my constituency, and I ended up running the yes campaign in that area. That gave me the confidence to decide that I would be just as good as anyone else at representing the area where I grew up, for which I have a deep passion.

Encouraging young people to get involved in politics is not new for the SNP. After her famous Hamilton by-election victory in 1967, Winnie Ewing used her maiden speech in Parliament to argue that the voting age should be lowered to 16. Further, the SNP Scottish Government have lowered the voting age to allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in all Scottish parliamentary and local council elections. The same day that happened, the UK Government denied young people the right to vote in the EU referendum. The SNP tabled an amendment culling for the EU referendum franchise to include 16 and 17-year-olds, but unfortunately it was rejected. I encourage the Minister and the UK Government to look again at extending the UK-wide franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds.

Like many colleagues from all parties, I get invited to schools to speak to pupils about my job. I was recently lucky enough to go back to my old school, Banchory Academy, to talk to some modern studies classes. When I studied higher modern studies at Banchory, there were probably only around 12 people in the class; when I went back last year, there were two classes of at least 18. That shows the growth in political engagement among young people in Scotland. The questions that young people ask me about political issues are always informed and articulate. Young people nowadays are digital natives, and with constant access to social media, they are always up to date with the latest information, news and current affairs. Indeed, 16 and 17-year-olds are often much more informed than people much older than them.

The Scottish and UK Youth Parliaments and youth councils are good examples of young people being engaged. Those are hubs of active young people taking political issues right to the heart of communities across Scotland. The Scottish Youth Parliament and youth councils have been important in raising awareness of issues of importance to young people such as mental health. It was also inspirational to see hundreds of Youth Parliament MPs debating in the Chamber a few weeks ago. The ones I saw spoke passionately and with authority on a variety of issues, and I am sure some of them could give Members of this place a run for their money.
At the weekend I met with one of my local MSYPs, Kyle Michie, to discuss the Not Too Young to Run campaign and get his thoughts on youth participation in politics. He had this to say about being an MSYP and youth political engagement:

“I have spent nearly two years involved in the Scottish Youth Parliament. In this time I have gone from being politically unengaged to encouraging and promoting involvement in politics to local young people. Organisations such as the youth parliament are effective in that they not only inspire Members of the Youth Parliament but countless others to speak up for their opinions and rights.

It is a positive shift in our culture that young people can initiate and take part in dinner table debates. Young people more than ever have been encouraged to promote their beliefs in a rapidly changing world—a skill which is undoubtedly vital to ensure Britain becomes a country that our future generations want to live in.”

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Having been an elected representative continuously for nine and a half years, despite having celebrated my 30th birthday only earlier this year, I encourage young people every time I meet them to get involved in adult politics, because politicians here are making decisions that affect their lives. Does my hon. Friend do similar?

Stuart Blair Donaldson: I do. Every time I visit schools or speak to youth groups, I encourage them to get involved. I am going to mention my hon. Friend a little later on in my speech—nine and a half years, really? Wow! It is important that we emphasise to young people that they could get involved in politics. However, we should also emphasise that there is not just party politics—when I was young, party politics was the last thing I wanted to do; young people can also get involved in community groups or in issues that they care about. Whether charities or campaign groups, the point is to get involved in something that they care about and make a difference.

I am lucky to be joined by some of my colleagues today who are fantastic examples of being not too young to run. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), as she mentioned, was 21 when she was elected to Aberdeen City Council in 2007. She would have been the youngest if it had not been for her brother who was elected at the same time at the age of just 18. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig), who is not here today, was also elected to Aberdeen City Council in 2007, and in 2011 he became the leader of that council at age 26.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) was elected as a councillor in 2012 at the age of 24, and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) was also elected at 24. Believe it or not, my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) was at one point the youngest councillor in Scotland when he was elected in 2005. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald)—he is not here—were under 30 when they were elected to this place, although I delight in reminding them that that is not the case anymore.

[Albert Owen in the Chair]

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): It seems like a long time since I was elected to local government back in 2005. Does my hon. Friend agree that although I was fortunate in having support from the local party network, who really encouraged me to run for election—I had not thought about doing that until then—that is not necessarily the case for everyone? The case he is making is about putting in place that support network for young people who want to get involved.

Stuart Blair Donaldson: Absolutely, and I will come on to speak about that. I cannot mention colleagues without mentioning my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), who was elected to this place at the age of just 20, edging me out as the youngest Member.

In the wake of the vote to leave the EU and the election of Donald Trump, we saw people taking to the streets to protest against those decisions. It was fantastic to see that passion, but we need to emphasise to young people that politics is not just about protesting against decisions they do not like or having a rant on Facebook. We need to make the case that they should be harnessing that passion and making use of it. The message must go out that “If you think the level of debate in politics is poor, get involved. If you think politicians aren’t representing your views, get involved. And if you think you can do a better job, get involved and run for office.”

I, along with a number of colleagues, would not have run for elected office if it were not for those in elected office encouraging and supporting us to run. Running for office, at whatever age, is not easy, and it is important that those elected at every level, whether council or Parliament, encourage young people to run. I would like to put on the record my thanks to those who encouraged and supported me to run. I would also like to thank those who told me I was too young and inexperienced and that I could not and should not run. Due to my contrary nature, that was as much of a motivator to run and succeed as those telling me that I could do it.

When I was elected, I was surprised to find that the international classification for a young MP is under 45. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!]” While that may suit some of my hon. Friends, that demonstrates the skewed nature of politics internationally. I am not saying that all our politicians should be under 30, but our politics needs to reflect society better.

It has been a pleasure to raise awareness of the campaign, which is an important step in encouraging young people to consider running for office. Young people will have to live with the consequences of the decisions made by politicians now and will most definitely have to sort out some of the mess that those decisions have left. We need young people to participate in decision making globally so that Governments and other actors take into account the effects of decisions that they may not be around to see. It is crucial that we as parliamentarians do all we can to ensure that our politics reflects our society, whether that be in age, race or gender, and to inspire and encourage young people to run for elected office. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I call the youngest Minister to respond.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am delighted to be introduced in that manner, Mr Owen. It is a pleasure to respond to this important debate, which reminds me and I think all of us of where we started our
own journeys in politics and the fact that we punctured through the veneer of the perception of what it is like to dare to be a politician in this country. We do need a thick skin and to be able to weather the storms of the Chamber or indeed Westminster Hall and, sometimes, the exposure, the intrusion into our private lives and so on.

Every time there is another story—however interesting or appropriate it might be—that somehow has a go at a politician or a Minister, it sends a more negative message to someone else who might be considering saying, “Actually, I’d like to stand in politics, but boy I don’t really want to enter that world.” We have to bear in mind the atmosphere that we create if we want other people who are watching this to be able to be encouraged to say, “Yes, I am happy to step forward into that exposure in order to participate in democracy” at arguably the mother of all Parliaments. That is important to Britain.

As a Minister in the Foreign Office, I spend a lot of my time going around the world underlining the importance of the rule of law, democratic values and human rights. We have 800 years of experience of that ourselves and we cannot expect others to change. However, we in this country must endeavour to underlining the standards that we aspire to be achieved in other countries. It is therefore a real pleasure to respond to the debate.

How do we galvanise and inject that seed of aspiration so that people do not necessarily stand in politics but participate in the political debate, which is just as important? I remember that when I was growing up, my school had an opportunity to participate in the UN youth assembly, which was a fantastic introduction for us. It armed us with more knowledge and experience of how decision making took place, which is crucial. I am sure all of us as MPs have visited schools in our constituencies to encourage students to participate in mock elections during the election season, and indeed once they become 18, too. It is tough.

The latest figures I see from Ipsos MORI show that time is arguably better spent targeting over-65s, of whom 78% are likely to vote, than 18 to 24-year-olds, of whom less than half are likely to vote. It is therefore beheld on us to try to change that, to get those youngsters, who are the future—they are the ones who hopefully will step into our shoes—to be involved and understand. Unfortunately, the challenge is that there are a lot of distractions, particularly with the internet and so on. People sometimes do not engage with the electoral process until they start paying taxes and being more affected by policy. We need to make sure that we burst that perception, and ingratiates ourselves and engage with young people to tell them to participate, have a view, share that view and influence decision makers.

**Kirsty Blackman:** I appreciate that this is not the tone of the debate, but I am sure the Minister did not mean to say that young people are too distracted by the internet to take part in politics. I am sure what he meant to say was that young people’s attention might be elsewhere—which is the same for adults. It is not only young people who sometimes look at other things. I do not think it is right for the Minister to say that young people are too distracted by the internet to take part in politics.

**Mr Ellwood:** No, I did not say that, but I am happy to clarify: the internet and other things that youngsters have nowadays can be, and are, distracting. It is the same for adults as well; there is a lot going on in our lives. We have a duty to make the importance of politics relevant. I hope that clarifies the point that I think the hon. Lady misunderstood.

Focusing on the work of the United Nations is important. Stepping aside from the work that we are doing in this country, we have to make decisions here about our place in the world and where we want to be. That is all part of the political mix, and it is where the public have a chance to influence us, such as in decisions on how much we spend on defence, on the environment or on international aid.

At the local level, age does not matter. People are affected by the character of their communities. It is critical to participate in local debates, whether or not people are old enough to vote. Again, it is important for us to not be distracted by the figures but to see them as a target, and to say, “Let’s change this; let’s engage with the youth and with schools in ways that we have perhaps not done before”.

The debate has certainly drawn attention to the hugely important development of democracy, not just in this country but beyond our shores. The facts are simple: more than half of the world’s population is under 30, yet they provide less than 2% of the world’s elected politicians. That matters, because young people are the future. Each generation brings fresh priorities, different perspectives and creative ideas. A representative democracy can only fully serve the needs of its people when it is truly representative of all of them.

While the situation is easy to describe, as has happened in the debate, the causes and remedies are much more complicated. Young people are less likely to vote and participate in the political process generally, possibly due to the perception that politics is run by an older generation that does not pay sufficient attention to the needs and interests of the young. If there were more young role models in politics, I believe that more people would follow their lead. We welcome the valuable perspective that the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson) brings to this debate and the encouraging of greater participation.

Strong external factors can discourage young people from participating in formal politics, such as the disparity that exists in several countries between the age at which people can vote and the age at which they can stand for office, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned. Another barrier has been the failure of political parties to promote enough younger people. Our selection processes all too frequently seek political experience, often at local or regional level, or long-held party membership, before candidates are selected. We perhaps need to update those views. That was reflected in the Richmond Park by-election, although not by my party. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) was expedited to become a candidate after a short membership of her party and actually won the election. That shows that the electorate are happy to consider somebody who has not been a party member for goodness knows how many years before having the right to stand as a candidate.

Supporting and promoting human rights, democracy and accountable institutions are key elements of our work at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Vibrant,
effective and accountable democracies are more likely to create the stable, peaceful and prosperous societies that we seek, and they tend to make for more reliable international partners.

Young people sometimes have to overcome centuries of social stereotyping that can confuse age with qualification. The fact that so much of the planet’s next generation remain so peripheral to representative politics across the globe is certainly worrying for the future of representative democracy, so it is right that we should look at the whole range of ways of encouraging people to participate in politics—particularly the young. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine is right to draw the House’s attention to the UN’s Not Too Young to Run campaign, which began on 22 November and aims to raise awareness around the world about the barriers to young people’s participation in public office.

Stuart Blair Donaldson: I appreciate the Minister’s response. As a Foreign Office Minister, will he tell us what the UK Government are doing in other areas around the world to promote participation, not only among youth but among genders and minorities to increase participation in politics?

Mr Ellwood: I will certainly come to that in the short time available; I will also write to the hon. Gentleman with more details, if I may. Perhaps after the debate he can tell me which areas he means. We have specific programmes tailored to certain countries in different parts of Africa, which are nuanced to reflect what is actually happening on the ground. Our Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the British Council are engaged on that, and a lot of work that the Department for International Development does through NGOs is directly connected to trying to get greater engagement and greater accountability, which helps to challenge corruption and all of the other issues as well. That is at the heart of what the Foreign Office is trying to do.

Returning to the United Nations’ efforts, the campaign aims to gather ideas for the promotion and expansion of opportunities for young people to stand for public office and to inspire them by showcasing young elected leaders. The campaign fits into a range of existing work by countries across the world to try to increase young people’s participation. I mentioned the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Educating the next generation about the political process and nurturing their interest is the essential first step. That is why the foundation runs programmes to promote youth participation in politics, including youth networks for political parties in the Caribbean and eastern Europe, with the aim of encouraging young people to engage in political life and become candidates for office.

In Africa, for example, the Nigerian group, the Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth & Advancement, which was an inspiration for the Not Too Young To Run campaign, is pursuing projects that support young people’s political participation not only in Nigeria but in other parts of Africa as well. It is also planning to work further afield in east Africa, moving across to Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco, too.

I am delighted that we are able to focus on this issue. It is something that I do not think we spend enough time on in Parliament. We all get elected, we come here, we pat ourselves on the back and then we focus on the big policy issues, but talking about wider participation in democracy is absolutely key. I very much commend the United Nations’ campaign. It is something that is at the core of what the Foreign Office is trying to do, as I said.

On every visit and in all of our engagement with members of Governments, the international, outward-looking Departments—from the Department for International Trade to DFID to the Foreign Office—look to inspire and to make sure that we engage the younger population so that they are involved. When they are not involved and governance is absent, and when there is a vacuum of inclusion, youngsters can be attracted, in the worst case, to forms of extremism, to violence, to crime and so forth. Engagement is critical from an early age. Schools, communities, families, Governments and international organisations such as the United Nations all have a role to play.

In conclusion, I congratulate the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine on drawing the issue to the attention of the House. I hope I can sum up its importance by quoting the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which has been mentioned a few times in the debate:

“Young people need democracy—and democracy needs young people”.

Question put and agreed to.
Dartford Crossing: Congestion

[MR ALBERT OWEN in the Chair]

4.29 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered congestion at the Dartford crossing.

I am pleased to have secured this debate. I appreciate that the arguments have been made in the House on a number of occasions in the past couple of years, but until Dartford is relieved of the threat of another crossing, I will continue to lobby the Government to locate the new lower Thames crossing away from Dartford to the east of Gravesend, which is option C.

The Minister is aware that the decision is keenly awaited. We all want it to be made swiftly, primarily so we can get on with building the crossing and have some alleviation of the congestion that Dartford suffers daily. Until the decision is made, I and others will continue to harass the Secretary of State for Transport and the Roads Minister.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I hope to make a contribution later, but first I want to say that I hear what my hon. Friend is saying loud and clear about a decision being made. However, surely want to say that I hear what my hon. Friend is saying loud and clear about a decision being made. However, surely he agrees that whatever the decision is, the Government should be kept fully informed and clear about a decision being made. However, surely he agrees that whatever the decision is, the Government should be kept fully informed and clear about a decision being made.

Gareth Johnson: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Option C, which Highways England prefers, would do exactly what he says. A significant proportion of the congestion—more than the 14% that is often quoted—would be moved from Dartford and, more importantly, a choice would be provided for motorists. At the moment, drivers, particularly of freight vehicles, have no choice and must use the Dartford crossing. Freight vehicles often cannot fit through the Blackwall tunnel, so must go to Dartford. If there is a problem on the approach to the Dartford crossing in Kent or Essex, freight and other vehicles cannot use the crossing, so there must be a choice and some resilience in the system, which is not there at the moment. It is clear that option C should be built, because of the choice it would give to motorists and the resilience it would provide that is currently not there.

It is in the interests not only of Dartford but of the whole country that we tackle this significant congestion problem. I submit that the approach to the Dartford crossing is the worst stretch of road in the whole United Kingdom. Not only does it have some of the worst congestion in the country, but to add insult to injury, drivers must pay to use it. They often pay to sit in traffic, which is why it is the worst stretch of road in the UK. The Department for Transport should deal with it as a priority.

No other stretch of road impacts so much on so many people. No other road has had a song released about it. You would rule me out of order, Mr Owen, if I quoted the lyrics of that song, but I am pleased to say that a cleaner version is now available on the internet should anyone want to download it. I think you get the gist of what the lyrics are likely to be. They illustrate clearly the frustration that many people experience when using the Dartford crossing.

No stretch of road in the country has such an impact on the local population as the approach to the Dartford crossing. When the M25 in my constituency is congested because of traffic on the A282 approach to the crossing, it paralyses the local town. It prevents children being picked up from school and people from getting to work and carrying out their business, and creates horrific pollution levels. It is killing people in the Dartford area.

It is worth looking at the accident figures for the A282 approach to the crossing. It is not just pollution that is having a detrimental impact on people’s health in Dartford; it is the accidents. During 2011-12, there were 79 accidents on the approach road. The following year, when the work started on the free-flow system, that number had increased to 143. In 2013-14, there were 318 accidents, double the previous number, and if that was not sufficient, from September 2014 to August 2015, it doubled again to 675. Last year, the combined figure for injury and non-injury accidents showed a reduction, which was pleasing, but still as high as 487. That is an horrific number of accidents in the area.

Stephen Metcalfe: I completely agree that the number of accidents my hon. Friend is describing is horrendous. What I cannot get my head around is how moving 14% of traffic—the figure may be disputed—away from the existing crossing will significantly reduce the number of accidents at that spot.

Gareth Johnson: It has been shown that capacity will increase by some 70% under option C. Highways England provided that figure, which illustrates clearly that option C would improve traffic and the problem of accidents at the approach. It is not just the volume of traffic that causes accidents; the poor road layout and the poor signage compounds the problem. We have seen a ninefold increase in the number of road accidents per year between 2012 and 2015, so better road signage and a better road layout are desperately needed to reduce the number of accidents at that location.

It is fair to say that we must plan ahead for the increase in traffic flow at the Dartford crossing. The tunnels were designed for 140,000 vehicles a day, but anything up to 170,000 use them daily and the laws of physics say there must be traffic issues. Traffic management must be looked at seriously, not just at the new lower Thames crossing and not just while it is being built. We should be discussing this some 15 years ago. Road planning means planning ahead for problems that will exist in future. It is a brutal fact that nothing was done for so many years that, to all intents and purposes, we are playing catch-up and trying to deal with a problem in 10 years’ time when it is here today. We should be debating the opening of the new lower Thames crossing, but instead we are debating where it should be.

I return to a point I made to my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe). There are two options on the table: option A and option C. Option C is preferred, not just by Highways England but others, because it would provide an alternative for motorists and some resilience in the network. The idea that we should just build more and more crossings at Dartford is pure madness. It flies in the face of...
common sense to suggest that more and more crossings in the same location, relying on the same local roads tunnelling through the pinch point that Dartford has become, is a solution to the problem.

When we are looking at what has worked well and what has not worked well in the whole Thames area, it is fair to say that the west of London is more affluent than the east of London, partly because of the lack of connectivity east of London compared with that to the west of London. Chelsea and Battersea trade very well and the transportation links are very good. Richmond and Twickenham are north and south of the Thames and interlink very well. However, when we come to the border between Essex and Kent, the Thames is like a brick wall between the two counties. Those two affluent counties cannot trade with each other to their full potential because of that lack of connectivity. I argue that option C would change that fundamentally and provide the connectivity that is lacking.

**Stephen Metcalfe:** I agree very much with what my hon. Friend is saying about the lack of connectivity between Kent and Essex. That may well be a barrier to economic growth, and one argument for a new crossing is that it will stimulate such growth, but option C is a halfway house. If we were really trying to develop economic growth, we would go for something further halfway. If we were really trying to develop such growth, but option C is a halfway house. If we were really trying to develop economic growth, we would go for something further.

We have mentioned before the failure of commerce to take off in the area east of London. When we talk to businesses in the area, we find that they desperately want option C to happen. We can speak to the garden city builders, the local enterprise partnership, the Freight Transport Association, Eurotunnel, the road haulage industry and Lakeside and Bluewater shopping centres. We can speak to almost any organisation outside the Thames Gateway area and, in Essex, the Basildon and east Thurrock area, and what it wants is for option C to happen. The Thames Gateway project has been held back as a result of a lack of infrastructure. The infrastructure is not there to support the commerce that is desperately needed in that area. Therefore, in Kent at least—the situation may be different in Essex—we are hard-pushed to find a business or organisation outside the Gravesham area that does not think that the solution to the problem is option C.

Another reason for that is that option C, according to Highways England, would enable vehicles still to travel at 70 mph. If we built another crossing at Dartford—option A—vehicles would be restricted to 50 mph. That is another clear reason why option C is the preferred route for so many organisations and people.

Another reason is that, with option A, there would be six years of roadworks on Britain’s worst stretch of road, at Dartford. It would be catastrophic for our area if we had to deal with that problem. It would affect the whole region as it has never been affected before, and hold back the south-east region in a way that it has never experienced, if we had six years of roadworks preventing vehicles from travelling from Kent into Essex and in effect closing off that whole area. The consequences of those restrictions would be catastrophic for the area both financially and in terms of people’s quality of life. If we build option C, the roadworks will not affect the current crossing. They can be dealt with in isolation at that location; they do not need to impede the traffic that is using the crossing now.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock mentioned an option D. There could also be option E, F and so on. Some people have put forward the so-called A14 option, which is preferred by my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway). It would be a 5-mile tunnel that simply ran parallel to the M25 in the east, coming off the M25. I believe, south of junction 2 and connecting up roughly around junction 30.

Highways England estimates that option C will cost £4.5 billion and take 10 years to build, but it is half the length of option A14, so I shudder to think what A14 would cost and how long it would take to build. The closest that we have come to a quote for that was in the answer to a parliamentary question tabled back in May. The estimate was that it would cost some £6.6 billion to build option A14. That would be prohibitively expensive. I have worked out that that tunnel would be roughly one fifth of the length of the portion of the channel tunnel that is under the sea. That gives people some idea of how long the A14 tunnel would be, and I am not aware of even any geological surveys having taken place. Frankly, a route that simply runs parallel to another and works more or less as a relief road, as opposed to a separate route, is simply not a viable project.

Some 30,000 leaflets were delivered in my constituency in support of the A14 option. They pointed out the virtues of that idea to my constituents and asked them to contact me to support it. Well, however many leaflets were delivered—we are told that it was 30,000—I have had just one response since then. The idea cannot exactly have taken Dartford by storm. It is not seen as a viable alternative by the people of Dartford—not in my experience, anyway.

I therefore conclude by saying that we need the lower Thames crossing to be built east of Gravesend—option C—and in the meantime we need Highways England to come up with innovative ideas as to how we can mitigate the existing congestion at the Dartford crossing. I ask the Minister to listen to his own traffic experts at Highways England, who favour option C, and to almost every business that has expressed an opinion on the issue. Listen to the local enterprise partnership, the garden city builders, the Thames Gateway, Bluewater, Lakeside—the list goes on. I ask him to listen to the haulage industry, but also to the people of Dartford, who have suffered immeasurably as a consequence of the Dartford crossing. It has affected the quality of life of local residents in a way in which no other area of the country has been affected. In Dartford, we are sick to the back teeth of congestion at the Dartford crossing, and we therefore ask that a plan be put forward swiftly to deal with the existing problems, but also, and most
importantly, to have the lower Thames crossing built where it gives the motorist an alternative, which is east of Gravesend—option C.

4.47 pm

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your leadership, Mr Owen. First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing the debate, although there is a sense of déjà vu about it, given that we discussed this issue at some length only three weeks or so ago and it seems to have occupied my inbox for most of this year. However, that does not mean that this is not a very important debate and we should not rehearse the arguments time and again to see whether new explanations or opportunities arise.

I have great respect for my hon. Friend. We came into Parliament at the same time and have worked on a number of things together. However, on this issue we are fundamentally divided. We agree about the principle and about what we are trying to achieve, it is just that we have completely different ways of achieving it. I want to put it on the record straight off that this is not about pushing the problem from my constituency to his, or pushing it to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) from that of my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway). It is about doing what we believe to be right.

I want to state from the outset that although I fundamentally oppose option C, that is not just because it would go through my constituency; it is because I do not believe that it would solve the problem. This is a once-in-a-lifetime, once-in-a-generation opportunity, so anything less than solving the problem where it actually is would be, in my opinion, a lost opportunity. We need to finish the M25. Anything else will be a waste or a mistake. It never got finished in the first place.

If my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham were here—he would have been here not out of the country—he would say that our hon. Friend the Member for Dartford should be down on his knees begging for option A14, begging for a solution at the existing crossing. I understand my hon. Friend’s opposition to that. I understand why he and our hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham have, immeasurable amounts of congestion. It is hideous, and we all know that, but if we put in a solution that does not solve the problem, they will still be suffering hideous amounts of congestion.

I want to paint a picture. It is a picture of a future where, despite my objections and all the evidence I have presented to the various Roads Ministers I have met and to the Secretary of State that option C will not work and will fail to tackle congestion at Dartford, option C—the “road to nowhere”, as it has been described—gets the go-ahead. The Secretary of State signs it off with the Minister’s advice and off goes option C into its next stage, cutting through huge swathes of countryside in Thurrock and across the fenland, which is destroyed and lost forever. Houses—some of them newly built—are demolished. A tunnel is constructed between Gravesend and Tilbury and miles of new motorway is built across the green and pleasant land that once was Thurrock.

On the first day the Minister is there, accompanied by the Secretary of State, with scissors in hand. There is music, cutting, fanfares, cars flowing beautifully and lorries arriving from Dover and heading off to wherever they are going, enjoying the views of the green and pleasant pasture from the motorway. That leaves the 86% who want to use the existing crossing—we can dispute whether it is 14% who want to use the new crossing, but it is around that, and that is Highways England’s figure—sailing onwards towards the existing Dartford crossing, enjoying a 14% increase in capacity on both the bridge and the tunnel. The traffic is flowing beautifully as far as the eye can see until—bang—an accident at the tunnel mouth, which is not a rare occurrence.

The written answer I received from the Department for Transport on 23 March 2016, in response to a question I tabled on 16 March asking how many times there had been delays or tailbacks caused by closure at the Dartford crossing, said:

“Typically there are in excess of 300 incidents per year resulting in partial or full closures of the Dartford Crossing. On average each incident takes approximately 27 minutes to deal with, often requiring a lane closure for safety purposes.”

The impact of that means it can take up to “3 to 5 hours for the road condition to return to normal.”

In response to another question that I tabled on the same day, asking how many times the Dartford crossing had actually closed in the past 12 months, I was informed that there were nine unplanned bridge closures due to either high winds, broken-down vehicles, collisions or police-led incidents, and that the west tunnel had closed five times and the east tunnel 12 times. Looking at those answers, I fail to see how a new crossing up to 15 km away from junction 2 on the Kent side, and 9 km away from junction 30 on the north side, would ease congestion at the existing crossing.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend has read the next point in my speech. The fact is that vehicles would have to commit to an alternative long before any incident happened. Just look at the map—I know that I am not really allowed to use props, but there is a useful map that shows how far the existing crossing is from where drivers would have to commit to when going north to option C or coming south around the M25 to option C.

So there we are tootling around the M2, on to the A2, and unbeknown to us there is a prang, as I described, at one of the tunnel mouths. It instantly loses 50% of capacity. However, we are already past junction 1 on the A2/M2 and we do not know there has been a prang. We are already in the flow of traffic and are committed to the route that we are taking, whether we are in a car or a lorry. Instantly, traffic starts backing up at the Dartford crossing.

The same scenario applies on the north side. Indeed, when I made these points to a logistics company based very close to the crossing in Thurrock, it said that the traffic backs up at the rate of a mile a minute when the
crossing closes. Even allowing for exaggeration, the point is clear: a crossing far from the existing one—where we know that it fails because of its importance around the M25—will do nothing for Dartford or Thurrock residents, for Essex or Kent residents or for anyone in the south-east of England, because vehicles will be trapped.

Gareth Johnson: What my hon. Friend describes is what we have now. When there is a problem at the approach to the Dartford crossing, everything is stuck. Even if only 30% of vehicles can be given adequate notice, by better signage, that they can use the alternative at option C, that will help thousands of vehicles. That cannot happen at the moment.

Stephen Metcalfe: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, but the point still stands. There will be vehicles trapped within what I am describing as the “congestion triangle” between junction 29 of the M25, junction 2 of the M25 and junction 1/2 of the M2/A2. Once someone is past any of those points, they do not have an alternative. Even if option C were built, they would still be heading towards the existing crossing. Although option C may still function beautifully once there has been an incident at the existing crossing, it will do nothing to address the problem. There will still be vehicles trapped in serious congestion in and around the existing crossing. No one can show me how option C would address the problems that I have just highlighted.

I know that it is not very fashionable to base decisions on evidence. We are in this post-truth era, but if Members look at my badge—everyone who would like one is welcome to one—they will see that I love evidence. Where is the evidence that option C will actually address the congestion, the poor air quality and the catastrophic impact of a failure at the bridge? When I challenged Highways England on that exact point, when I sat down with Mr Potts before he moved on, he said, “We will have to do that modelling after the decision is made.” Quite frankly, that is not good enough, and that is not the right thing to do. That is why Dartford and Thurrock should be begging for a solution at the existing crossing. It may well be option A14. I do not know; I would like to look at all those options again. I hear very clearly what my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford says about the inconvenience of the roadworks that would come from building at option A, and that does need to be addressed. However, anything that fails to sort out the problem where it actually exists is a missed opportunity.

When I sat down to write this speech and gather my thoughts, I really struggled to know where to start. Both my hon. Friend and I could write a book on this issue; we have been living this now for years. We can go back and we look at the history of the project. It started in its current form back in 2009 and has had a number of different incarnations during the past few years. We are now getting close to a decision. It may well be that the Minister and the Secretary of State stick with option C, as recommended by Highways England. However, I fear that we are answering a question that was posed many years ago, conflating too many different issues and not actually answering the original question: what do we do about congestion at Dartford?

Until we can answer that question satisfactorily—whether we spend £4.5 billion on option C, or £6.5 billion on option A14—we should not commit to anything. We have to know that what we are going to do and spend billions of pounds on will actually have an impact on the lives of the people my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford and I represent. Until that can be proven, building a very handy road from Dover to the north of England, although that may have merits, would be a wrong-headed decision. My hon. Friend has made many, many points that I agree with, and we want the same outcome. We want better air quality for our constituents. We want free-flowing traffic. We do not want the number of accidents and the problems that we all see. However, if we do not address that problem now we are still going to have real problems in the future.

My hon. Friend asked why so many people have opted for option C. There was a long list of people, including those at Lakeside, but I would just challenge that. I am not challenging them saying that they would like option C, but look at where Lakeside is located, with its slip roads going the wrong way on to the A13 heading towards junction 30 on the M25. Even with the slightest incident its slip roads back up very quickly, so I am surprised by that. Very few people from the long list of those who want option C are based in Thurrock, although I accept that some are. However, when given only one option—I think we all accept that the consultation that was conducted earlier this year really presented only one option, which was option C—it is no wonder that people said that was the one they wanted. They were not really given an opportunity to comment on option A.

Finally, I reiterate that we have to solve the problem where it lies. We all deserve to see the evidence and see how this will work before any decision is made to carve through my constituency, or indeed that of my hon. Friend.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Before I call the Front Benchers, I remind Members that we are finishing at 5.30 pm. The Minister may want to give Mr Johnson an opportunity to wind up briefly.

5 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing a debate on this long-running issue, which he has raised many times on behalf of his long-suffering constituents, for whom traffic gridlock regularly causes misery.

As a child growing up in south London in the 1960s with grandparents in north London, I have vivid memories of the Blackwall tunnel, which was then a single tunnel with two-way traffic. I remember my sister and I singing in the back of the car, whiling away the hours—however, it was probably not the song with the X-rated lyrics that the hon. Gentleman referred to—and how we cheered when the Dartford tunnel came along. It was a huge relief but, as we have heard, we now need a 21st-century solution. I am sure that we all are awaiting the Minister’s response with interest, so I will keep my remarks brief.

The hon. Gentleman made an excellent case for option C, and the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) made a different case; it felt ever so slightly as though one was intruding on a family dispute that had been running for a long time, and I certainly do not want to pour oil on troubled waters. However, to rewind slightly, back in 2013 the Government decided that we needed a new lower Thames
crossing connecting Kent and Essex. We are now three years down the line and, whatever the different views, we really need a decision. This has taken a long time and has created massive uncertainty for residents and businesses.

Despite the problems, I am told that the economy locally is doing well. However, I am also told that 73% of businesses in Dartford feel that their business is suffering because of congestion, and growth is clearly being stifled by the growing crisis. The Dartford crossing is designed for some 140,000 vehicles to cross a day. On average it reaches that design limit, with 137,411 vehicles crossing daily in 2014-15. Some people tell me that it is operating at 117% capacity. The number of journeys made using the Dartford crossing rose by around 2 million between 2011 and 2015, and 869 complaints regarding congestion have been made to Highways England in just the last 12 months.

Last month, the Minister said in a written answer that according to a traffic modelling assessment and traffic flow forecasts produced for the Dartford crossing by Highways England, the annual average daily traffic flow at the crossing is forecast to rise from 140,000 vehicles in 2014 to 159,300 vehicles in 2025. The new housing development in the nearby garden city and the proposed theme park will introduce further challenges, so if all we can agree that congestion at the Dartford crossing is already severe and that, without action, the problems will only get worse.

In a Westminster Hall debate in January, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), said that the Dartford crossing was identified in 2011 as “a top-40 project”—but if it is a priority, why are the Government yet to deliver the solution? The need for an effective solution is not just about logistics; it is a matter for public health. It has been estimated that 6.7% of deaths in Dartford are attributable to long-term exposure to air pollution—a sobering figure that is exceeded only by London and Slough. Although minor improvements in reducing congestion have been achieved since the removal of the tollbooths and the introduction of the Dart charge, there is still a long way to go.

A freedom of information request to Highways England showed that in the past two years, unpaid Dart charge fines by UK-based drivers have topped £500,000. If the Dart charge is to be effective in cutting congestion, fines need to be properly enforced and non-payers chased. Of course, there are also the non-UK based non-payers. That point is timely, given the Brexit debate going on now in the main Chamber, so will the Minister tell us today what progress he has made on chasing European non-payers? Will that form part of the Brexit negotiations? Indeed, in the new spirit of openness that apparently started yesterday, will he tell us whether it is part of the Government’s negotiating strategy even? Where will it be in the priority list? Could it be a red line—even a red, white and blue line?

But I digress. The Labour group in Dartford—ably led by Jonathan Hawkes, whom I thank for his advice in preparing for this debate—has rightly called for a new traffic plan focused on delivering additional investment to bring forward the delivery of promised improvement works, intervention to ease the bottlenecks that cause congestion and improvements to the public transport network, as well as the decision on the crossing. Many were hoping—indeed, expecting—something to be announced on that subject in the autumn statement. The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that the Government will invest £220 million to ease congestion at critical pinch points around the country, but there has been no mention of whether the hard-pressed people of Kent and Essex will benefit from that. In fact, there has been no mention of where that money will be spent at all, so perhaps the Minister will enlighten us today.

To return to the crossing and the recent history, as we have heard, Highways England is still examining the evidence submitted in its consultation process earlier this year on a new lower Thames crossing and has said that the Government will make an announcement later this year. Autumn was mentioned at one stage. Today is a very warm winter’s day, but we are beyond autumn and definitely into winter. The end of the year is imminent, so I am hopeful that the Minister will announce that decision today. I have been studying his countenance carefully to see whether he is a man who seems likely to be bearing good news. We shall see in the next few minutes. He may even find a way of describing the decision as a thing of beauty. Again, I do not know—I live in hope—but if he does not, I hope he will tell us why he cannot tell us and when he might be able to do so.

If the Government are serious about solving Britain’s congestion crisis, they need to get the ball rolling on the major projects that they have promised. The problems in Dartford are reflected across the country, and improving our country’s infrastructure cannot be put on the back burner for any longer.

Stephen Metcalfe: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s remark that many projects need to be addressed. However, if we can focus again on the problems that we are experiencing between Kent and Essex at the existing Dartford crossing, my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) wants the same thing, as I said, but we differ on how that should be achieved. The hon. Gentleman said that we need a decision, and I agree, but it has to be the right decision. Just because option C is something that is being presented does not make it the right thing. It is something and we can get on and make the decision, but if it does not tackle the problem, does he agree that that would be a missed opportunity?

Daniel Zeichner: There are limits on how long one can procrastinate. Evidence has clearly been gathered and it is time for the Government to make a decision. They need to end the uncertainty and make a decision on this issue without further delay, because Dartford has suffered from years of under-investment in local road networks and public transport, and the Government need to commit now to immediate investment in the local road network around the location of the new crossing. Local councils need to be assured that they will not be asked to foot the bill for those much needed improvements, which is a major concern, given the levels of cuts to council budgets.

Gareth Johnson: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need a decision, so that we will be able to get on with building a new crossing. Does he agree with me, though, that we needed a decision 15 years
ago? The fact that that decision was not made then, and
that nothing at all was done about the congestion in
Dartford, has resulted in the problems that we experience
today.

Daniel Zeichner: I see where the hon. Gentleman wishes to lead me, but I will not be tempted to go down
that path. All I will say is that the Government are in
place today and the Minister is in charge. It is up to him
whether to make the decision but I am sure that the
hon. Member for Dartford would agree that a decision
would be timely, and that having one as soon as possible
would be best.

I have been told that Dartford, like so many other
places, needs a new traffic and transport plan, taking in
road improvement, connectivity and improved public
transport provision. As we speak, people who are sitting
in their cars in queues at the Dartford crossing will be
anxious to hear what the Minister has to say. I hope he
can bring them some good news and that he does not
disappoint.

5.9 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John
Hayes): What a delight it is to serve under your
chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend
the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing
the debate. As the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel
Zeichner), who speaks for the Opposition, spoke of
seasons, I thought of John Clare, who wrote:

“The winter comes; I walk alone,
I want no bird to sing;
To those who keep their hearts their own
The winter is the spring.”

Perhaps the seasons are what we perceive they are.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said,
this is not the first time we have considered these
matters in recent weeks. Indeed, on 14 November we
had a longish debate on the Floor of the House on
exactly this subject, to which he and my hon. Friend the
Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen
Metcalfe) contributed. None the less, he is right to say
that repetition is no sin. Indeed, it is virtuous when it
allows Ministers to consider matters as closely as I have
been invited to again today. It is right that we should
consider these matters, because we take the issues very
seriously.

The Dartford crossing is an important part of the
arterial road network and is used extensively by private
motorists and hauliers—by those carrying freight,
particularly those going to Dover. There are important
issues, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said,
of congestion and safety. The answer, quite simply,
is that we need to do more; I would be the first to
acknowledge that. I will talk a bit about some of the
things that I have pledged to do when I have spoken
about the Dartford crossing in recent weeks, and about
what I have done since. Ministers have to be held to
account and if they say they are going to do things, they
should be expected to deliver on those pledges. I want
to reassure those who, like my hon. Friend the Member
for Dartford, take a strong view, including many of his
constituents, that tackling congestion at Dartford should
be a priority and that it is a priority for the Government
and for Highways England.

I will start with some of the facts. When my hon.
Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock
talked of evidence, I thought of C.S. Lewis, who said that
“reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ
of meaning.”

Although the facts are important and I take them very
seriously, one should never be the captive of them because,
in delivering these kinds of strategic policies, one must
exercise—dare I say it—one’s vision too. None the less,
let us look at some of the facts with which my hon.
Friend the Member for Dartford and others will be well
acquainted.

The Dartford crossing has provided the only road
crossing of the Thames east of London for more than
50 years. I, too, was familiar with the Blackwall tunnel when
there was nothing else, because I grew up in south-east
London and used that road many times. The Dartford
crossing is one of the busiest roads in the country, used
55 million times a year by commuters, business travellers,
haulage companies, emergency services and holidaymakers.
It opened in stages—the west tunnel in 1963, the east
tunnel in 1980 and the bridge in 1991—in response to
the growing traffic demands of the kind the hon. Member
for Cambridge described. The existing crossing is at
capacity for much of the time and is one of the least
reliable sections of England’s strategic road network of
motorways and major trunk roads. Congestion and the
closure of the existing crossing occur frequently, and I
know that this creates significant disruption and pollution,
which impacts on businesses and individuals locally.

In the Adjournment debate that I referred to earlier, I
mentioned that options for the M25 at Dartford have
been considered for a considerable time. Indeed, various
methods have been used to help to ease the congestion
problems at the crossing. As a response to congestion,
in particular on the approach to the payment booths, a
cashless payment system called Dart Charge was introduced
on 30 November 2014. In fact, Mr Owen, you will
remember that I was the Minister at that time, during
my first visit to the Department for Transport. I emphasise
the word “visit” because all ministerial appointments
are visits and nothing more, are they not?

I was pleased with the Dart Charge, knowing that it
would help with the flow of traffic, and it has had some
impact. The hon. Member for Cambridge made that
point, and I will come to the other points he raised in a
moment. I do not want to overstate the impact of the
Dart Charge, but I think it was the right thing to do and
it has had a positive effect. Overall, the Dart Charge and
the new road layout have improved journeys through
the Dartford crossing and reduced journey times for
drivers.

Gareth Johnson: Although I accept that traffic flows
have improved from Essex into Kent since the toll
booths have been removed, I dispute the argument that
they have improved from Dartford into Essex. A lot
depends on how those figures are measured. Certainly
the people of Dartford have no sense whatever that
improvements have come about in anything like the
manner that the Minister mentions. They feel, almost
universally, that congestion has got worse in Dartford
since the toll booths were removed.

Mr Hayes: Yes, I understand that. I think that is
partly because those changes were made against a
background of increased demand, so the number of
vehicles using the crossing actually continues to grow. In a sense, any improvement will have been mitigated, affected and, for some, concealed by the growing traffic volumes.

In factual terms—the evidence is important—volumes of traffic have grown by more than 5% in the past year. Now, that might sound relatively minor but, given the figures I used earlier, 5% growth in a single year is an extra 2.7 million crossings. It is unsurprising that people see that extra volume of traffic and say that the Dart Charge has made less difference than it actually has because, of course, it is not possible to compare the situation with what it would have been like had we not done it.

It is important to recognise, however, the proper concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock and the profound concerns of those whom he represents. In the end, the issue comes down to the fact that the crossing is operating at over-capacity—something like 117% capacity. Journey times southbound are estimated to be significantly better than before the Dart Charge was introduced, being very nearly five minutes quicker, on average, in the year to August 2016 than the year before.

Northbound, however, we recognise that there is still more to be done. A combination of increased traffic and significant roadworks at junction 30 resulted in only 14%, which is Highways England’s own figure, were diverted a way from that, would that not still mean that the existing crossing would be operating at over-capacity at some times? Ergo, do we not need to increase the capacity at the existing crossing, rather than build something else with other aims in a different place?

Stephen Metcalfe: I know the Minister is now very aware of some of these issues, as we have debated them on numerous occasions. He cited a figure a moment ago: he said that the crossing is operating at 117% capacity at times. If 14%, which is Highways England’s own figure, were diverted away from that, would that not still mean that the existing crossing would be operating at over-capacity at some times? Ergo, do we not need to increase the capacity at the existing crossing rather than build something else with other aims in a different place?

Mr Hayes: I hesitate to intrude on the well-mannered and comradely debate between my hon. Friends the Members for South Basildon and East Thurrock, and for Dartford. It is certainly true that one would need to consider any further crossing eastbound in connection with, and in the context of, Dartford. My hon. Friend is right to isolate those two things. To see them out of context would be an error, and the Government certainly will not do that. It is right to take account of the effect at Dartford of any changes that were made. I would not want my hon. Friend to assume that that is not my view, although I do not think he does.

The approach to the two northbound tunnels also has to be controlled for lorries carrying dangerous goods. For this corner of the south-east, which has more than its fair share of oil and petroleum facilities, a number of petrol tankers use the tunnel. To make this safe passage, the tankers are queued and taken through in a convoy while all other traffic is held. The older west tunnel is a smaller bore and cannot accommodate the taller lorries that travel the network, so the mix of lorries across both tunnels reduces the flow of traffic. That is an important point.

I have said repeatedly, including when we last debated these things, that I would look at what improvements could be made. I related those remarks to the facts that I have just described. I have asked Highways England to look closely at what more can be done to separate vehicles. I understand the concerns of staff about traffic wishing to cross west to east at junction 1A, which I have asked Highways England to look at. We may be able to do further work on the A282, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford knows, and at the junction where gridlock often occurs.

Those are all important matters, and they do not obviate the need for a more strategic solution, but I want to be absolutely sure that, in dealing with the different kinds of vehicles and local people’s access to the crossing, we are doing as much as we can and should do. To that end, I commissioned Highways England to consider those matters more closely. Further work may be possible that would go some way towards alleviating the problems that my hon. Friend has set out.

The safety and performance of the crossing is under constant review to identify other ways to improve conditions. Continuing improvements to the traffic safety system that was introduced as part of Dart Charge, and the management of dangerous goods and abnormal loads, will form part of any further work. I will update hon. Members when I have a report from Highways England about the further steps that it intends to take—that is the right way to go about things.

Managing traffic flow during incidents and reopening lanes as soon as possible afterwards are also important and have often been a cause of concern to local people. I spoke of road signage the last time we debated these matters and, looking at it again, there are issues with the signage on the crossing approaches, particularly northbound. We might be able to do more in that area. We are working with local authorities on both sides of the crossing to improve traffic flows between local and strategic road networks, which has been a perennial issue.

Trying to provide a solution that assists those travelling from far away to far flung destinations who want to cross, as well as addressing the very local traffic in the immediate Kent area and the traffic that moves between Kent and Essex, is important to our consideration of how to get the best outcome. That is not entirely straightforward, but it does not seem impossible to find a way to address both objectives.

Highways England and Kent County Council have a joint approach on a number of improvement measures to junctions used by traffic approaching the crossing from Dartford, which will be familiar to my hon. Friend. The roadworks at junction 30 and the A13, which greatly affected journey times, were substantially completed last week. That should help, and motorists should start to see the benefits of reduced congestion at the crossing and improved journey times as a result.

Plans are also being developed to encourage over-height vehicles to be in the correct lanes. As I mentioned earlier, it is important that HGVs are not stopped and redirected as they cross because that has a significant
effect on congestion. We may be able to improve the signage in that respect. As my hon. Friend will be aware, Highways England regularly meets a wide range of stakeholders to discuss other improvements and how they might be implemented. I meet the chief executive of Highways England on a monthly basis, and I keep the performance of this road under regular review. There is more to do, and I will keep my hon. Friend and all hon. Members updated on Highways England’s plans and future actions.

Before I move to my pre-peroration itself—I will also say something about the lower Thames crossing—I should say that the hon. Member for Cambridge asked important questions about compliance with the charge, and he deserves answers. Initial compliance, as he will know, is some 93%. He is right about what happens next, and I share his view. He is right that pursuing those in other domains who do not pay the charge is challenging. We do that work, and I often interrogate my officials about their progress. As a specific result of his question, I will make our latest compliance figures available in the Library—again, that is the right thing to do.

The evidence shows that the Dart Charge is working, and 93% initial compliance is indicative of that. When we take into account the people who pay later, the figure is impressive, but any non-compliance is undesirable and it is right that we use every avenue to chase those who do not pay.

In the longer term, the Department for Transport recognises the argument for the lower Thames crossing and the role it might have in easing congestion at Dartford. Highways England consulted on a shortlist of options from 26 January to 24 March, with 47,000 people taking part, making it the largest ever public consultation on a UK road project. No decisions have been made, but I hear what the hon. Gentleman said about the seasons, notwithstanding my admiration for John Clare. It is important that we go further in making our findings and conclusions known. We will take a decision when we have considered those responses, and we will report on the location, route and type of crossing. Subject to the necessary funding and planning approvals, we anticipate that the new crossing, if publicly funded, could be open in 2025.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford has once again done the House a service by allowing us to explore these matters. I hope he can tell from what I have already said that the Department and I take the issue very seriously. We are considering all that can be done to ease the circumstances of his constituents, because we know how important this crossing is for them and our country.

The strategic road network is receiving unprecedented attention from this Government, and my hon. Friend will know that the road investment strategy, which I developed when I was last a Transport Minister, is the first time in a long time that a Government have taken a long-term view on how we should invest in roads and then committed funds to that view. In doing so, we are cognisant of changing circumstances and particular places where those circumstances are having an impact on other Government priorities, such as air quality and the perennial and compelling priority of safety. To that end, he can be sure that we will be decisive and determined not only in protecting the interests of all those who use our roads but in doing the right things to make the investment work for the best.

In that spirit, Highways England will continue, on my instruction, to monitor closely conditions at the crossing, to understand the various factors contributing to performance and to ensure that we use this crossing in the most effective and efficient manner.

5.29 pm

Gareth Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), and I agree that we all want the same thing. I thank the Minister for his responses. The biggest decision of all, of course, is whether we choose option A or option C. If anyone were to suggest that all the existing London crossings should be put in the same place, we would think them mad. That is effectively what option A offers: more of the same in the same location. Option C would offer an alternative choice to motorists that is not currently available. I ask the Secretary of State for Transport and the Roads Minister to consider that option.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall  

Thursday 8 December 2016

[Andrew Rosindell in the Chair]

Post-study Work Schemes

1.30 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Scottish Affairs Committee of Session 2015-16, Post-study work schemes, HC 593, and the Government response, HC 787.

Mr Rosindell, it is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship in this short debate on the Scottish Affairs Committee’s report about post-study work schemes for Scotland. One of the first things that we did after I assumed the Chair of the Committee, which is obviously a pleasure and a privilege, was to go to Scotland and ask the people of Scotland, regular contributors to the Committee’s work and other stakeholders what they wanted from the Committee. I felt that was the right thing to do, and I think colleagues on the Committee who are here today found that a valuable and worthwhile session. It helped us to create a report about the Committee’s work and decide what work we would undertake during this Parliament.

One key theme that emerged, and that people stressed to us that they were really keen for us to debate and discuss, was the prospect of a post-study work scheme for Scotland. We would expect the higher education sector to say that, and of course it did, but we also heard clear representations from business, trade unions and practically every sector in Scotland. We therefore decided to publish a report on post-study work schemes, and we are pleased that it has received so much attention in Scotland.

During our inquiry, the Committee heard from Universities Scotland, the UK Council for International Student Affairs, Colleges Scotland, the Scottish Council for Development and Industry, the Institute of Directors, the Scottish Trades Union Congress, the Scottish Government, and the Immigration Minister himself and his colleague the Secretary of State for Scotland. Essentially, we heard a practical chorus of overwhelming support for the reintroduction of a dedicated post-study work scheme for Scotland. The only discordant voices in that general chorus of desire for such a scheme to return were those of the man who has his hand up—the Immigration Minister—and his colleague the Secretary of State for Scotland. Essentially, we heard a practical chorus of overwhelming support for the reintroduction of a dedicated post-study work scheme for Scotland. The only discordant voices in that general chorus of desire for such a scheme to return were those of the man who has his hand up—the Immigration Minister—and his colleague the Secretary of State for Scotland. Everywhere else we went, every submission that we secured and every piece of evidence that we heard during the many sessions that we had on this issue very much supported the idea that Scotland should have a dedicated post-study work scheme to retain our international students.

It is perhaps fortuitous that we are having this debate the week after the Committee published our report “Demography of Scotland and the implications for devolution,” which I very much recommend to the House. The Committee is particularly pleased with the report, as it offers a fascinating snapshot of the population and demographic trends in Scotland. Essentially, it concludes that Scotland’s population is growing, which practically everyone in Scotland welcomes. Population growth could not make the Immigration Minister more miserable when he gets his figures for the rest of the United Kingdom, but in Scotland we welcome it and recognise it as a key factor in our economic growth and wellbeing.

Some of our findings in that report are interesting and pertinent to this debate. There are troughs and spikes in Scotland’s population. One of the peaks is among 17 to 19-year-olds, among whom there is migration to Scotland. The Committee interpreted that as people coming to Scotland to be educated because of our wonderful higher education sector. Our universities are world-class; three of them are in the top 100. However, the Committee was somewhat concerned by the trough in 22 to 25-year-olds, among whom there is no immigration but emigration. People at that critical age, who are at the start of their working careers and could make a real contribution to Scotland’s economy and wellbeing, are actually leaving Scotland. That worried us. The Committee interpreted that as students who we had educated to a high standard in our wonderful universities leaving the nation of Scotland. We found it hard to understand why on earth we would open our doors to international students who wanted to come to Scotland and enjoy the experience of being there, educate them to a high standard, and then boot them out. We found that very difficult to comprehend.

Let me outline the current situation and conditions in Scotland. In 2014-15, there were 29,210 non-EU international students enrolled in Scottish higher education institutions, representing 12.6% of the total higher education student population. In 2013-14, the last year for which we have figures, fees from non-EU international students made up 12.5% of the total income of Scottish HEIs. It is hard to get economic assessments, but it has been estimated that non-EU international students contribute more than £400 million in off-campus expenditure, which obviously benefits the many towns and cities that have a wonderful university as part of their community.

That financial contribution is obviously welcome—it was welcomed by practically everyone we spoke to—but my colleagues on the Committee will remember clearly that when we visited Aberdeen and were hosted by the University of Aberdeen, it was stressed to us that although that was great, those international students also enriched our college and university campuses with their experiences from different nations and made those campuses multicultural and multinational. Learning alongside students from all around the world gives indigenous Scottish students a fantastic experience. Universities Scotland stressed to us that that was as important as international students’ financial contribution.

Non-EU students currently study in Scotland on general tier 4 student visas. Under the conditions of that visa, those students can study and work while they are in Scotland, but critically, they have four months to find secure employment after they complete their course or they have to leave the United Kingdom. It seems that the only available route for students to try to secure employment is the route between tier 4 and tier 2—a route that was described to us by employers’ organisations, trade unions and industry representatives as complicated, tortuous and almost impossible for some employers to
secure. To be eligible for that route, graduates must have completed their course and have a job offer with a salary of at least £20,800 from an employer that is licensed to sponsor a tier 2 visa. Employers’ organisations told us that that was cumbersome and burdensome and some employers did not even bother trying, because they knew that it would be a tortuous process.

That £20,800 minimum salary for a tier 2 visa applies right across the UK; it makes no difference whether you are in London, Inverness or Northern Ireland. It may be possible for a 22-year-old in London to get a graduate entry-level salary of £20,800, but that is almost impossible for a new graduate in Scotland to secure. We see that in the evidence. We found during our inquiry that tier 2 sponsors are mainly in London and the south-east; in 2013, 63% of them were located there, compared with only 6% in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for giving way. He will recall that one of the key parts of the evidence that the Committee heard was Scottish universities themselves saying that when they take on some postgraduate employees, they do not pay them £20,800 a year. Even they are not able to retain the very best of the staff they train.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely spot on. The Committee took issue with the idea that £20,800 is somehow applicable to the Scottish situation. I will come back to that point, but first I will make a few other remarks about how we could resolve this general situation.

In the past, we had a dedicated post-study work scheme in Scotland—the famous Fresh Talent initiative, which ran so successfully between 2005 and 2008. It was initiated by the former Labour First Minister Jack McConnell and had the overwhelming support of the Home Office down here. I still meet students in Perth who studied at the University of the Highlands and Islands who are products of Fresh Talent and are now making an incredible contribution to my community and constituency. Fresh Talent was subsumed into the general tier 1 post-study work visa scheme that ran from 2008 to 2012. Although that was still a post-study work scheme, it ended Scotland’s advantage in being able to secure and keep international students. We did not mind that as long as we still had some means to secure international students who wanted to remain in Scotland. It was only with the election of a Conservative-led Government in 2010 that we saw the beginnings of the end of any dedicated post-study work scheme.

I will try to understand the Government’s motives for all that. In the response to us, they said that the scheme was apparently “too generous”. I would hazard a guess—that is something to do with the Government having almost an obsession with immigration numbers, and that their general desire to get immigration down from hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands was behind the idea of closing any notion of a post-study work scheme. International students were an easy target—of course they were—and we could see where they were coming from. Everything has to be done through the book—in order to secure international students, universities and higher education institutions have to go through a complicated process. It was so easy to close those routes and, instead of doing the hard work about illegal immigration, target the students. However, targeting students was a singularly self-defeating initiative. The people we want to stop coming into the country and staying here are the most educated—those we spent a fortune on—who want to stay in our country.

Of course, a lot of things were said about what the Government did. The Scottish Affairs Committee, before I assumed the Chair, did a report about that and warned of the consequences, as did the Select Committee on Home Affairs, of which I believe you were a member in those days, Mr Rosindell. Those reports said that there would be consequences and an impact, and an impact there has been. One thing the Committee was keen to discover and determine was what sort of impacts the closure of that route had had on Scotland, and the clear message we got from practically everyone was that the impact has been significant, negative and stark.

We cannot get a proper picture because the evidence is patchy, so the only thing we could look at was migration from tier 4 to tier 2, but we were able to estimate that there has been a fall-away of 80% in international students continuing to work in Scotland after their studies. That has had an immense adverse impact on our access to talent, and it has resulted in increased skills shortages in all key sectors the length and breadth of the Scottish economy.

More than that, there is the disincentive value of not having a particular route. We heard again and again from representatives of the education sector that Scottish universities are now losing out in the race to secure international talent from across the world. We are moving into a different type of working environment in the ability to share and transfer knowledge. The knowledge economy will be so important to economic growth as we go forward, and Scotland is in a great position because of the quality of our universities and the research done in Scotland, but we are now told that there is a massive disincentive to coming to Scotland.

Students sitting in, say, India, Australia or Kenya, and looking at the UK will be hearing all this stuff about Brexit and the splendid isolationism that the UK seems to want to be part of. If they are hearing that all the debate about leaving the European Union was about immigration and people not being welcome, they are not going to be particularly inclined to seek out a university in Scotland, as part of the United Kingdom, to come to and study. They will be thinking, “What on earth would I go there for, when I would be made most unwelcome and probably get booted out the minute I finish my course?”

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a real risk that we will lose competitive advantage to other Commonwealth and English-speaking nations such as Canada and Australia because of these restrictive rules? The University of Glasgow has expressed exactly the concerns he highlights and we all have constituency examples of those. I had a constituent who was literally a rocket scientist who was determined to work here and the UK Government’s visa restrictions meant that she could not.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. We all have examples of that, and it is utterly depressing that we are booting out young people
of supreme ability and talent whom we have spent a fortune educating and who have such potential to add to our community. I come to his important point about the "excellent" label. We are obviously an Anglophone country—we have had the English language since Gaelic, and I know that he is keen on that particular issue—but there are now options in Canada, Australia and the United States. I know the Minister, when he addresses us, will tell us that there is still growth in international students. Yes, I concede that there is still growth in the number of international students coming to Scottish universities, but it is just 1%. Growth in Canada, Australia and the US is 8% to 11%, so we are obviously falling behind.

What we conclude is that the current post-study work routes do not meet the needs of Scotland, and by quite a margin. To try to be helpful to the Minister—we thought we were being helpful, anyway—we suggested doing a few minor things, which would not upset anybody, to tweak and improve the current situation. We started from the minor tweaks and moved through to suggesting a stand-alone post-study work scheme for Scotland—we looked at all the options available.

There are things that the Government could do so readily and easily without destroying their reputation for immigration obsession. For example, they could extend the length of time to find a tier 4 job. Why is that four months? What reason is there for that? They could create some bridge to enable students to move from tier 4 to tier 2, because all of a sudden they are at a cliff edge where, if they have not got a job or a sponsor, they are out. They could give people help to try to find a job. Then there is the issue of a regional salary. The minimum salary is set at £20,800. That does not work for Scotland—it is almost impossible to find a graduate-level job at that. How about regional variation? We suggested to the Minister that the Migration Advisory Committee look at that. I thought that was a very reasonable suggestion. Another thing the Government could do, which is totally within their gift at the tweaking end of how they could help to address and sort this problem, is reduce the burden of tier 2 sponsorship on employers. Overwhelmingly, employers told us that it was really difficult to secure international students. Those are things that could be done.

We also recommended that there should be a return to a post-study work scheme—we even suggested that a Scotland-only scheme could be possible. We have had the experience of Fresh Talent, which worked perfectly well. I know the Government had issues with it—we will probably hear a little about that from the Minister—and there were problems associated with it, but we learned from that experience and we could bring forward another scheme.

Things have changed since 2008 when Fresh Talent ended—I accept that. The immigration system has changed and we have a much more—I will use the word "cautious" approach to immigration issues, but, because of that caution, the Government have put a number of things in place. For example, landlords are now required to carry out rent checks before entering into tenancy agreements, whereby one could check the residency of international students. For some time now, employers have been required to carry out right-to-work checks on employees, and the partial devolution of income tax means that we have a perfect register to ensure that people who come to Scotland remain in Scotland—we can check where they are.

I think the Minister will tell us that that would not work for Scotland because people would go to the south-east and to the rest of England, but there is now a range of means and mechanisms available to Scotland to ensure that people who come to study in Scotland remain in Scotland. The thing is, if they break any of the conditions—if they are checked and they are in the south—they will just get kicked out. What is the point in that? They could come to a country that would welcome them, that wants them to be there and that recognises their ability to contribute, or they could go to the south-east and into the black market and be ever fretful of being pursued by the authorities. So of course this could work; there is no good reason that a Scotland-only scheme could not work.

Lastly, there is the commitment that the Government have already given us on trying to resolve the situation. I do not think that the Minister recognises our particular issues on this or understands some of these points. I think he has heard the chorus of complaints about the issue and the desire for a post-study work scheme to return to Scotland, but let us remind him of the commitment that the Government have to work with the Scottish Government in order to pursue that. That was in the Smith commission, which said:

"The Scottish and UK Governments should work together to explore the possibility of introducing formal schemes to allow international higher education students...to remain in Scotland and contribute".

Nothing has been done on that, and I am not surprised by that given where the Government are when it comes to this. Instead, the Government response—I do not really want to go into it—was singularly disappointing, almost frustrating. To turn around and tell us, as they did in their short response, that the current arrangements are "excellent" is almost a slap in the face to the higher education institutions of Scotland and those who depend on them. They are not excellent, Minister—they are woeful, pitiful and not working for Scotland.

We are asking the Government to have another look at the matter and to have a look at our population and demography, because they are linked and they suggest a way forward for Scotland on the issue. We in Scotland do not share the Government's obsession with immigration. In fact, quite the opposite; we actually value people coming to our country. We are not full up in Scotland. We see the value to our economy of immigration, particularly high-value immigration. The Government must try not to put their immigration obsession upon Scotland.

We in the Committee think we have produced a rounded report. It suggests a number of things the Government could do, from minor tweaking, which would help the current situation, to wholesale reform. It is disappointing that the Minister has singularly refused to do any of those things. With my colleagues from Scotland behind me, I tell the Minister to think again, to do the right thing for Scotland and to allow us to have a post-study work scheme to grow our economy and to keep international students in Scotland.

1.51 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. Scotland has a long history of excellence in higher education. As a beautiful country with outstanding
international universities, it is a very attractive place for students from around the globe—despite the UK Government’s best policy efforts to put them off.

International students are being hammered again and again, and at some point they might decide it is not worth the hassle and the hostility from UK Visas and Immigration and take their valued custom elsewhere. The UK Government say they are delivering an immigration system that is working in the national interest. I have to disagree. With an ageing population and with skills shortages across many sectors, it seems to me that policies that block successful routes for the brightest talent to stay and work are acting very much against our national interest. The Secretary of State for Scotland admitted as much in his evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee—if only he would make his case more forcefully to his Cabinet colleagues in Westminster, instead of being the Cabinet mouthpiece in Scotland.

On immigration, as with so many issues, one size does not fit all. If the Tories do not wake up to that fact, they will wake up to a UK without Scotland sooner rather than later. It is not beyond the wit of the Government to modify policies to meet differing needs in different parts of the UK—they simply choose not to. I, along with my colleagues, as my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) mentioned, have no question why the post-study work visa was dropped. We know that it worked and that it successfully provided a workplace opportunity for new graduates in Scotland. As he said, we have seen 80% fewer people move to work visas since that was dropped.

The official excuse of widespread fraud seems to be a bit of a fraud in itself. The evidence from the Scottish university sector shows that it has an impeccable record as sponsors of genuine, high-calibre students. A leaked Government paper reported in The Times suggested that 99% of international students abide by the terms of their visa and return home when it runs out. Dropping the post-study work visa is perhaps to do with the Government’s failing target to cut net migration, which my hon. Friend also referred to. That is something they know that cannot even properly measure, let alone control.

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):
The hon. Lady spoke of “widespread fraud”. That is not something that we are worried about for universities, but it applies to more than 900 colleges, some of which had been taking people on courses that did not even exist. That is why we had to take action in that regard. She should not confuse our universities with some of those bogus language schools and other colleges that have lost their right to take overseas students.

Deidre Brock: Unfortunately, there are probably none of those colleges in Scotland. I am afraid the effect on the high-quality universities he refers to is significant, and he is not allowing for that in the immigration regulations that he is laying down.

Students make up the biggest numbers in the points-based system by far, which makes them an easy target to turn on and off, and vulnerable to the whims of Whitehall number crunchers eager to massage immigration figures without the risk of pesky appeals. I accept that, rightly or wrongly, people across the UK have concerns about immigration—perhaps it is those who are struggling due to the lack of Government investment in housing, health, schooling or jobs in their area—but the fact is that they are not worried about students. A recent survey showed that 76% of the UK public do not regard international students as immigrants at all. Universities in Scotland and the global talent they attract are massively important to our economy. There are 31,000 non-EU international students across Scotland from 180 countries. They contribute many millions of pounds per annum to Scotland’s economy. That is a tap we need to keep flowing—not turn off.

It is not only about the numbers. Having people from so many different cultures living in Scotland greatly enriches our society in ways that we really cannot measure. Making the place less attractive to students, and making them part of the overall hostile environment strategy, is damaging to our universities. We cannot be happy to take their fees but hostile to letting them stay and work for a while. Students will vote with their feet and universities will suffer. As my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire said, we have heard of big increases in the recruitment of international students—10% or 11% growth in 2015—in competitor nations, such as the US and Australia. That was the US’s largest increase in 35 years, while the intake of non-EU international students across Scotland and the UK remains flat.

Scotland is fed up of being told to put up and shut up. We implore the UK Government to look at the evidence, listen to the university sector and help take Scotland forward, not haul us back.

1.56 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is great to see you in the Chair, Mr Rosindell, and to follow two comprehensive and compelling speeches on the reintroduction of the post-study work visa.

Frankly, the Government’s current immigration policy is completely failing Scotland. When gathering evidence for the Scottish Affairs Committee, we found that international students without doubt have an enormous positive impact on Scotland. That was recognised in all of the evidence we gathered from everyone we spoke to during our evidence sessions, including the Scottish and UK Governments. Not only do non-EU international students contribute an eighth of the total income of Scottish higher education institutions, it is also estimated that they contribute more than £400 million in off-campus expenditure.

In addition to those financial benefits, bringing together students from different nations creates a global environment in Scottish universities that benefits both the UK and international students. If that is not enough, it has even been backed by the UK Government’s own statistics. The Home Office has estimated that the number of non-EU international students moving to work visas after their studies has fallen by more than 80%. The Home Office could not provide separate figures for Scotland, but the evidence the Committee collected showed that the impact on Scotland, where higher education is the third largest sector, is both significant and, sadly, negative.
Scotland has different demographic needs from other parts of the UK, as we found in the Scottish Affairs Committee’s most recent report, which was published only a couple of weeks back. That is due to slower population growth and a need to expand the size of the workforce. Scotland also faces significant skills shortages in a variety of sectors. Retaining non-EU international graduates to work in Scotland is an important element of the response to those challenges. The report also recommended that the UK Government work constructively with the Scottish Government to introduce a formal scheme to allow international students graduating in Scotland to remain and contribute to economic activity. That principle enjoys cross-party support in Scotland, as well as being strongly backed by the business sector.

Given that two published reports have said more or less the same thing, it is now clear that the UK Government must act—and swiftly. To put that into perspective, I am blessed with not one but two universities in my constituency of Dundee, both of which have felt a huge impact since the UK Government ended the tier 1 post-study work visa. Indeed, the principals of both Dundee University and Abertay University have been vocal in their support for post-study work schemes that attract international students, all of whom make a valuable contribution to university and city life.

Professor Pete Downes, principal of the University of Dundee, said that an improved post-study work visa would “put Scotland back on a competitive footing with universities in Australia, Canada and New Zealand. It would make life a lot easier for employers and it would help to address Scotland’s skill gaps”.

Only yesterday, when taking evidence on Scotland’s place in Europe, the Scottish Affairs Committee listened to economist Professor Anton Muscatelli describe the post-study work visa as a “hugely beneficial scheme”.

The Scottish Affairs Committee laid out several options for improving post-study work routes, ranging from minor changes to a more substantial overhaul, all of which could be readily implemented and would solve many of the challenges that both employers and international graduates face in Scotland. Those proposals, which are both pragmatic and feasible, include extending the length of time that tier 4 visa holders have to find a tier 2 job; creating a bridge visa, to give international graduates sufficient time to find a tier 2 job; having regional salary caps for tier 2 visas, to reflect different wages across the UK; and reducing the burden to employers of tier 2 sponsorship.

It goes without saying that all the evidence the UK Government have received through our Select Committee report has been completely disregarded. They seem more driven by ideology than pragmatic outcomes. I am extremely disappointed by the UK Government’s response to the report. They completely rejected calls for a more flexible post-study work visa system for international students in Scotland. The report and recommendations, which were based on extensive discussions with businesses, universities and immigration lawyers, were disregarded by the Immigration Minister, who claimed in the Government response—this has to be the best euphemism I have ever heard—that the work visas already available to international graduates “comprise an excellent post-study work offer”.

It is interesting to note that even after dismissing our findings, the UK Government are now trialling a new tier 4 visa for some postgraduate students in four universities in England, and—would you believe it?—not a single Scottish university has been included in that pilot. When will the UK Government listen? The calls from Scotland for a more flexible post-study work visa are overwhelming, but they have so far fallen on deaf ears.

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman talked about salary levels in Scotland. May I respectfully point out that salaries in Scotland are higher than in the UK as a whole? That means if we were to apply regional salary requirements, the minimum salary required to sponsor a tier 2 migrant in Scotland would be higher than it is currently, using the UK-wide data.

Chris Law: I hear the Minister’s point, but I do not know of any students who graduate from university and find a starting salary of £20,800. The problem is where the threshold begins, which makes it almost impossible for people to continue to work straight after leaving university.

What is the point of spending week after week gathering evidence from different voices from across Scotland when no one is listening? The Government’s immigration policy in no way recognises Scotland’s needs or serves our economic and societal interests. Work study visas are not in isolation. The Government continue to resist pragmatic change that would not only help Scotland to attract international students but support the impact of Scotland’s ageing demographic. What would really benefit Scotland is the full devolving of immigration power, so that we can ensure Scotland’s thriving future.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I am grateful for the Scottish Affairs Committee’s work on this most important subject.

In Scotland we usually associate depopulation with rural areas that struggle to create jobs and retain young people in their communities. Areas such as the highlands and islands and Argyll and Bute do indeed contend with depopulation and have done so for hundreds of years. However, what is less recognised is that my constituency of Inverclyde, just 40 minutes from Scotland’s largest city, has some of the highest rates of depopulation in Scotland.

A report from Inverclyde Council concluded that Inverclyde’s rate of depopulation was proportionally higher than that of any local authority in the UK between 1981 and 2009. Over the same period, the number of young people in Inverclyde aged under 24 has fallen by 42%—almost double the rate of decline we have seen across Scotland as a whole. Since 1951, Inverclyde’s population has shrunk by more than 57,000 people and is projected to decline for at least 20 more years. There are no easy or simple solutions to that problem, but if we are to see Scotland and Inverclyde reach their full economic potential, we need people. To help to get those people, we need a favourable immigration policy that addresses our specific circumstances.

The UK Government told us that they are “delivering an immigration system which works in the national interest and is fair to British citizens.”
Unfortunately, that is simply not a realistic appraisal of the effects of UK immigration policy. Whether it is spousal, work or post-study work visas, our immigration system does not work in the interests of Scotland or my constituency. The UK Government have also said:

“Uncontrolled, mass immigration also makes it difficult to maintain social cohesion, puts pressure on public services and can drive down wages for people on low incomes.”

I assure the Minister that I am more concerned about uncontrolled emigration and its effects on social cohesion and our ability to maintain social services, as well as the way in which it stifles investment and employment opportunities. In fact, over the years, the immigrants who have chosen to live in Inverclyde have contributed far more to our community than they have taken out of it.

The UK Government’s lack of understanding of our situation derives from their interpretation of the “national interest” to mean the interests of the south-east of England. The UK’s nations have a range of needs, and my constituency is not well served by an immigration system that does not work in the interests of Scotland or my constituency. The UK’s nations have a range of needs, and although there is consensus among elected representatives, perhaps they will listen to the experts in Scotland’s higher education sector. Universities Scotland said that the UK has “one of the least competitive policies on post-study work in the English-speaking world.”

The University of Edinburgh warned that the removal of the post-study work visa was a “damaging” change that would lead to a “‘brain drain’ of highly skilled global talent from Scotland.” The principals of Glasgow University, Aberdeen University and Robert Gordon University have also voiced their concerns and called for the reintroduction of the post-study work visa in Scotland. If the UK Government are intent on maintaining their current policy, they cannot claim that it truly represents all of the UK’s nations. The Scottish higher education sector and Scotland’s elected representatives have made it very clear: Scotland wants the post-study work visa to be reinstated. It is not too late for the Government to make this positive change.

Pete Wishart: I want to draw my hon. Friend’s attention to our Committee’s very fine report on Scotland’s population and demography, which shows that Inverclyde is the second to last when it comes to immigration, with a projected 12% population change compared with the Scottish average. He is on to a very important point; there are regional variations in Scotland, but Scotland is way behind England when it comes to these things. I support him in saying we need to ensure we have these people coming to areas such as his.

Ronnie Cowan: I thank my hon. Friend for his timely intervention and for highlighting my point.

The inevitable result of the UK Government’s irrational commitment to reducing non-EEA migration is a Scotland that is less attractive to international students. The millions of pounds that those students contribute to our higher education sector will be under threat, and we will see a reduction in the influence and soft power we currently exert throughout the world. The frustrating aspect of this self-destructive policy is that it is entirely unnecessary and avoidable. We need only look to Canada, where regionally tailored visas are resulting in a more even distribution of migrants. If Canada and other countries can introduce regional variations in immigration policy, there is no reason the UK cannot do likewise.

The UK Government say the introduction of such a scheme would overcomplicate our immigration system. As the Minister is aware, Scotland previously introduced the Fresh Talent initiative, which allowed the Scottish Parliament, in partnership with the Home Office, to create a tailored policy to combat depopulation. The Fresh Talent initiative was not perfect, nor did it solve all of Scotland’s problems, but the fact that it existed at all is proof of the UK Government’s ability to introduce regional variations in our immigration policy if there is a political will to do so. I do not agree that there are insurmountable practical barriers to implementing such a policy.

If the UK Government will not listen to Scotland’s elected representatives, perhaps they will listen to the experts in Scotland’s higher education sector. Universities Scotland said that the UK has “one of the least competitive policies on post-study work in the English-speaking world.”

The University of Edinburgh warned that the removal of the post-study work visa was a “damaging” change that would lead to a “‘brain drain’ of highly skilled global talent from Scotland.” The principals of Glasgow University, Aberdeen University and Robert Gordon University have also voiced their concerns and called for the reintroduction of the post-study work visa in Scotland. If the UK Government are intent on maintaining their current policy, they cannot claim that it truly represents all of the UK’s nations. The Scottish higher education sector and Scotland’s elected representatives have made it very clear: Scotland wants the post-study work visa to be reinstated. It is not too late for the Government to make this positive change.

2.9 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. As a member of the Scottish Affairs Committee, I am delighted that we are here today to discuss our report into post-study work schemes and the Government’s response. I want to place on the record my gratitude to the Liaison Committee for selecting the report for debate, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is leading the debate as ably as he chairs the Scottish Affairs Committee. Having sat with him through every oral evidence session, both in this place and in Scotland, I appreciate, as he does, just how different Scotland’s immigration needs are.

Again and again, the economy seems to be the highest priority for the people of Scotland, who value quality public services. There is a real understanding of the need for a strong economy to support them. I applaud the continued efforts of the Scottish Government in that regard, but many economic levers are still outwith their grasp. Immigration policy is a key area that remains reserved to Westminster, and although there is consensus across Scotland that the return of a post-study work route would be of enormous economic benefit to Scotland, the Home Office thus far has refused to act.

Why is this type of visa so important? Around a fortnight ago, the Centre for Cities published an insightful report, “The Great British Brain Drain: Where graduates move and why”. It found that the draw of London for the UK’s highest-achieving graduates is driving a brain drain that deprives Scotland and other nations and regions of talented workers. That resonates with one of the conclusions of the Scottish Affairs Committee’s report in which we noted with great concern that the outcome of the Migration Advisory Committee’s
recent review of the tier 2 visa does not meet the needs of Scotland compared with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Societal attitudes in Scotland are generally very open to immigration. One need only look at the recent EU referendum, for example. In parts of the UK, immigration seems to have been a prime motivation for how many people voted, whereas in Scotland, which voted overwhelmingly to remain, immigration rarely came up in the conversations I had with members of the public during the campaign. A much more influential factor seems to have been the economic impact of leaving the European Union and the fact that the implementation of the recommendations would further concentrate postgraduate work for non-EU international graduates in London and the south-east of England. Disappointingly, the Government failed to address that point in their response. Not only is their wilful ignorance doing Scotland a disservice, but the Centre for Cities report concluded that the brain drain to London risks damaging growth in the overall UK economy. In short, the Government are cutting off their nose to spite their face.

A return of the post-study route would allow talented students to remain and to contribute to the Scottish economy, which in turn would benefit the UK economy as a whole. There is no good reason why such a scheme could not be put in place in Scotland. It is hugely disappointing that despite repeated and sustained calls to introduce such a visa in Scotland, our universities are being excluded from the English tier 4 visa pilot that was announced in the summer. In the past, the Government have used a one-size-fits-all excuse for not allowing different immigration rules in Scotland from those in the rest of the UK, but the pilot blows that out of the water.

It is even more disappointing that UK Ministers have apparently ruled out a return of the post-study work visa in Scotland without even meeting Scottish Ministers or the cross-party steering group on the topic. The Scottish Affairs Committee concluded in February 2016 that the scrapping of the UK-wide visa scheme in 2012 had made Scotland a less attractive destination for study. The number of non-EU students remaining in Scotland after graduation fell by more than 80%. The study. The number of non-EU students remaining in Scotland after graduation fell by more than 80%. The Scottish Affairs Committee concluded in February 2016 that the scrapping of the UK-wide visa scheme in 2012 had made Scotland a less attractive destination for study. The number of non-EU students remaining in Scotland after graduation fell by more than 80%. The Scottish Affairs Committee concluded in February 2016 that the scrapping of the UK-wide visa scheme in 2012 had made Scotland a less attractive destination for study.

Deidre Brock: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Margaret Ferrier: I am sorry, I will not take any interventions, because other Members want to speak and we want to hear from the Minister.

Scotland’s universities are world-class and a destination of choice for students and academic staff from overseas. Five of our universities are ranked among the top 200 in the world, which is not at all bad for a wee nation of 5 million-plus people. The University of the West of Scotland, which is in the process of building a new campus in my constituency, ranks among the top 5% of universities worldwide. We are punching above our weight, yet the Home Office seems insistent on trying to disadvantage us by tying our shoelaces together.

UK immigration policy poses a significant risk to universities in Scotland, which are losing out to key competitors in attracting international students. We have seen a significant fall in the number of new entrants from some countries since 2010-11. The number of Indian students has fallen by 59%, the number of Pakistani students has fallen by 38% and the number of Nigerian students has fallen by 26%. It is no coincidence that other countries are experiencing large increases in the number of international students in higher education.

In 2012-13 to 2013-14, international students in Canada increased by 11% and in Australia by 8%. In 2013-14 to 2014-15, the number of international students in higher education in the United States increased by 10%. It is likely the Government will say that there could be other factors affecting the figures, but they cannot escape the fact that the UK is becoming an increasingly hostile environment for immigrants in general. That fact, combined with the promise of a more attractive and accessible route to post-study work options in other countries, means we are losing out.

If the Government are truly committed to higher education in Scotland, they must start listening to the concerns of every main political party in Scotland, businesses, the education sector and trade unions, which are united behind a return of this visa to Scotland.

Pete Wishart: I do not know whether my hon. Friend is as impressed as I am about what we observe in the Scottish Parliament, where every political party supports the call for a return of a post-study work scheme. Even the Minister’s colleagues in the Conservative party are working constructively to make the case. Does she agree that the calls from Scotland should not be ignored, particularly when they are cross-party and Conservative colleagues are involved?

Margaret Ferrier: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. It is not just on the post-study work scheme that our voices are not heard loudly and clearly. Will the Minister liaise with his Conservative colleagues in the Scottish Parliament and move this ahead? It is apparent from the Government’s response to the inquiry that there is a real unwillingness to do so. We need a change of direction and a change of attitude. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) said, we need a move from ideology to pragmatism. If this Tory Government are not prepared to do that, they should hand the power to do so to the Scottish Government, who stand ready to do a much better job.

2.17 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I thank you for culling me to speak, Mr Rosindell, particularly as I had not indicated in advance that I wanted to do so. However, I believe we have time available for the debate until 3 o’clock, so I appreciate being called. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I commend the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart)—I hope I do not burst into flames for saying that—on the way in which he conducted the post-study work visa inquiry. I hope we do not push that to a Division. I joined the Committee after the inquiry had started, but I was on it when it considered the report, which is full and fair. The Minister and the Government should reflect seriously on it.

Since the EU referendum result, we have seen that one size no longer fits all, as we heard from the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). Post-study work visas are one area where one size
[Ian Murray]

certainly does not fit all, and did not in the past. We heard about the Fresh Talent initiative that the former First Minister in Scotland put in place, which was a slightly different scheme from any in the rest of the UK until it was rolled out across the whole of the UK. Of course there were problems and well-documented evidence of bogus universities bringing people to the UK to work, but such issues should have been dealt with when considering how the scheme operated, rather than by scrapping the whole scheme and throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

The Select Committee report sets out a number of fair and reasonable suggestions that the Government could look at to keep the UK framework and foundation of the immigration system. I understand all the arguments about not fragmenting the system, and ensuring that it is fair to everyone and that Britain remains open and free across its borders, but things can be done to make the system much more responsive to the people who are here.

It is not just the Select Committee saying that. It is indeed a cross-party report that was unanimously agreed, but many of the people who gave evidence said the same thing. Sir Tim O’Shea, principal and vice-chancellor of the University of Edinburgh, is hugely experienced in the higher education sector and was very animated, when he came to speak to the Committee, about the impact that the current situation is having on a world-class university such as Edinburgh. The reason why he was so animated was that a university in a country such as Scotland does not become one of the top 20 universities in the world unless it can attract the best talent to study at the university and unless that talent can be kept there beyond university to feed some of the information and experience that it has had back into the university sector.

This is about much more than just the nuts and bolts of allowing people to work here beyond their university career. It is about cultural enrichment. It is about people putting something back when they have taken something out. It is about the contribution that they make when putting something back when they have taken something out.

I was pleased when the then Minister for Immigration and the Secretary of State for Scotland came to the Select Committee and explained a little about the trials being done at Imperial College and the Universities of Bath, Oxford and Cambridge to look at how the system can be reformed. I am highly critical of the criteria used to pick those universities. I am not critical of the universities being picked—they have obviously ended up at the top of the list as a result of the criteria. I just say to the Minister, with all genuine respect, that he should look at putting a Scottish university into that list, for a number of reasons. First, it would enhance the trial, on the basis of the differentials that the Chair of the Committee has already spoken about and the embracing of the post-study work visa by Scottish universities. Also—I say this with all sincerity—it would take away the undermining of the trial by Scottish MPs complaining constantly that there is no Scottish university in the list. Let us pop one in there and enhance the trial, and if it works, a Scottish university will already be part of the trial and part of the system that may transpire from it.

We also need to examine the figure of £20,800. I remember as a student in my final year at Edinburgh University going to the careers service and not having one iota of a clue what I wanted to do when I left university, so I ended up leafing through the brochures sent in by graduate employers, looking at how much they paid on the back and applying for all the ones that paid the most. I cannot remember—it was 20 years ago—seeing many salaries that would have been the equivalent of £20,800 now. We can understand that if someone who is earning £21,000, £22,000, £23,000 or £24,000, it is quite good for them to be on the scheme, and of course they can get the visa attached to that, but there must be some flexibility about the £20,800.

Mr Goodwill: Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that if we reduced the salary threshold for overseas students, that could bring downward pressure to bear on salaries paid to British students—Scottish students—who are taking the self-same jobs?

Ian Murray: They are not getting those salaries, though, are they? If they were, we would be complaining about that preventing people from entering the workplace. There is always a reason for having figures. All we are asking—this is all the report said—is for the Government to look at having a little bit of flexibility on whether £20,800 is the right figure for a salary. I understand what the Minister says about differential salaries, and I agree that the average salary in Scotland would not always be lower than £20,800, given the matrix of average salaries across the UK. Perhaps removing London and the south-east from the system and then recalculating the average would be a slightly fairer system to use.

I ask the Minister to look not only at the £20,800, but at popping a Scottish university with low numbers of visa rejections into the system. I have asked the Home Office for the data, but they are covered by data protection, so I cannot see which Scottish university would be fifth on the list, or could be used, but I am sure that the Minister can go away and look at that.

A much bigger thing—this might even help the Conservative Government with the net migration figures—would be to take international students who are here for bona fide study and work out of the immigration figures. That would be a perfectly sensible thing to do. Everyone in the country, whether completely anti or completely pro-immigration, would no doubt see it as reasonable that someone coming here to study as an international student should not be part of the immigration figures. They are here to study, to learn, and, if they meet the criteria for an additional visa, to work. That sensible approach would automatically reduce the country’s immigration figures, so it would be a good news story. It would also mean that our universities were not subject to constant right-wing attacks about the immigration figures because they are bringing in students, even though those students bring an awful lot of money into the country. That money also oils the wheels of finance departments in universities so that they can deliver the education system that we all wish to have.
There are a number of ideas in the report, and a number of additional ideas for the Minister. I look forward to hearing an additional response from him, but I do plead with him to have a look at the report. It is not an attack on the Government or the immigration system. It contains sensible, reasonable and measured recommendations to try to make the system better for our constituents, but also for our wonderful, world-class higher education system in Scotland.

2.26 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and his new colleagues—the fresh talent—on the Scottish Affairs Committee on their excellent work on this important issue and on bringing this debate to the House.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions today. All of them, in their own eloquent way, added to the convincing—indeed, overwhelming—case for reintroducing the post-study work visa in Scotland. It is really an open-and-shut case. In short, reintroducing the visa would be good for our universities and students, for business and the economy and for Scotland—for the country as a whole.

On the first point, we have heard already how non-EU international students are of great value to Scotland’s universities and the economy. Each year, they bring in about £444 million in fees alone and an estimated £488 million in off-campus expenditure—not all, I hope, in the pubs of the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray). Universities Scotland has calculated that Scotland has lost out on at least £254 million of revenue since 2012 as a result of the closure of the tier 1 post-study work visa. That figure does not include the considerable additional economic benefits from highly skilled international graduates contributing to the Scottish economy after university.

We should always remember, however, that in addition to the positive economic benefit from attracting these bright international students, they contribute immeasurably to the quality of the educational experience for all students. Domestic students and staff are exposed to different perspectives, contributing to their international experience and the development of critical thinking. International students create a more culturally diverse environment.

On the second point, hon. Members have highlighted how important retaining some international students here can be for business. They broaden the skills base and bring new ideas and links. In 2014, about 25% of all job vacancies in Scotland were hard to fill because of a shortage in available skills. That was up from 15% in 2011, and the closure of the post-study work route has certainly not helped in that regard.

On the third point, hon. Members have spoken about how Scotland as a whole benefits from a post-study work scheme, not only because of the demographic challenges that we face—an issue to which I will return shortly—but because attracting international students is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) said, key to a nation’s soft power. Scotland and the UK as a whole would benefit by gaining a vast network of global ambassadors among our international alumni.

Against that background, the very bad news is that removal of the post-study work scheme has had a substantial impact on the ability of students to remain in the United Kingdom after graduation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire said, last year only 7,000 international students from across the UK made the transfer from tier 4 to tier 2: in 2011 that figure was close to 50,000, so there has been an overwhelming drop of more than 80%.

The case for a post-study work scheme for Scotland is therefore a powerful one. Unfortunately, the response from the UK Government has been hugely frustrating. Their arguments just do not stack up. The Government argue that international student numbers have remained steady or even increased slightly since the post-study work scheme ended, but, as my hon. Friend said, that misses the point. There is no doubt that we could have attracted even more students with a post-study work offer that was commensurate with what our rivals in other English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada offer. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) pointed out, Scotland has seen a 59% decrease in the number of students from India since 2009-10. Indeed, the year after the post-study work route closed, recruitment of students from India fell by 26% in a single year. In their argument on the numbers, the Government miss another point: in Scotland, not only do we want students to come, but we want some of them to stay afterwards, and the current system has impacted on that severely.

The Government also argue, on the basis of a small and imperfect evaluation report, that the Fresh Talent scheme had flaws. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire that the scheme was a great success, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) said, no one is arguing that it was absolutely perfect. The point made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South was absolutely right: we should not ditch a whole scheme on that basis but address its imperfections, improve it and make it work.

The principal argument is that a significant number of students graduating from Scottish universities then went to work in other parts of the UK. However, the key point is that the visa did not prohibit that happening. Those students were doing absolutely nothing wrong, so the answer is simple: make it a formal condition on the face of the visa that the person lives and works in Scotland. That should be no more difficult than making it a condition of a person’s visa that they study on a particular course or work for a particular employer.

The Government argue that there is already a competitive post-study work offering, but the UK post-study work offer barely exists, in that there are basically four months of additional leave after graduation in which to find a job that qualifies for tier 2. That does not remotely compare to the offerings of competitor countries in north America or Australia and New Zealand.

I could spend my whole speech discussing why tier 2 is not working well for Scotland but, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire also touched on that. Our small and medium-sized enterprises are at a significant disadvantage in complying with the
rules and regulations, compared with the big multinationals that make full use of them in other parts of the UK economy. Suffice it to note—as my hon. Friend did—that just 6% of tier 2 sponsors are in Scotland and Northern Ireland compared with 62% in London and the south-east, so the rules are working for London. However, it is not just Scotland that is struggling to compete—other parts of the UK are losing out as well.

Pete Wishart: I am glad my hon. Friend picked up on the point about 62% of tier 2 sponsors being in London and the south-east. That area does not require the international students, so I am pretty certain that he would agree that we should try and make the situation equitable across the United Kingdom and incentivise people to come to Scotland. That surely reinforces the call for regional variation on these issues, so that we can get international students in Scotland and not where they are probably not required—that is, in London and the south-east.

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is not just about Scotland—Northern Ireland, Wales and parts of England are struggling to compete with London. The one-size-fits-all rules are set according to the economic needs of London and the south-east, so an extra couple of months, as is offered in the Government pilot scheme, will not alter the position. As another hon. Member has said, the failure to include any Scottish universities in that pilot was a slap in the face and a political own goal.

The Government are trying to defend the indefensible. I will close with two broader points. First, as has already been touched on, this is ultimately being driven by the Prime Minister’s obsession with the net migration target, which is making her pick the low-hanging fruit—in other words, international students. In fact, the current Home Secretary has tried to ditch or water down the net migration target—I think she probably knows it is a nonsense target. As my hon. Friend did, I am pretty certain that he would agree that we should try and make the situation equitable across the United Kingdom and incentivise people to come to Scotland. That surely reinforces the call for regional variation on these issues, so that we can get international students in Scotland and not where they are probably not required—that is, in London and the south-east.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to appear under your chairmanship today, Mr Rosindell. I welcome the report, and not just because I was part of the Committee that drew it together back in February. I am a huge supporter of the Select Committee system. It does the House credit because, by and large, the people who serve on Select Committees park their partisanship to try to do a piece of work for the benefit of the people they are doing it for.

An exceptional thing that the Scottish Affairs Committee does is take the Committee out to the people. It goes around the country and not only takes advice from experts during sittings, but invites the public to come to play their part in discussions. Before, during and after the formal part of discussions, it engages with people who have an interest, which gives a much broader view that shapes the Committee’s reports. Our discussion today reflects both that and how seriously people take this issue in Scotland.

What is the situation in Scotland? It is a nation that needs to stem population drift. I welcome the news from the Chair of the Committee that that is being reversed to some extent—I had not picked up on that, but it really is good news. It is a nation that welcomes students and workers from across the world and that has an education system that is second to none. It is a nation that has always welcomed strangers warmly, a nation that has a cultural history without compare, a nation that offers a lifestyle and standard of living as good as anywhere on this planet, a nation that wants and needs to build up its ranks of workers, researchers, scientists and everyone else capable of driving this great country forward. Where I come from, we call that a win-win situation for all concerned.
What do we have against us? We have a Government in Westminster who act as if Scotland is some sort of colony, still under the rule of empire; a Government who are driven by fear of their own Back Benchers and the xenophobes hounding them across the country; a Government who sign up to a ridiculous populist commitment to reduce immigration to below 100,000—they have to accept that they have failed repeatedly to reach their own targets—a Government who are ignoring the needs of the nation as a whole to bolster their own political status in this House.

That is all shown not only by this debate, but, for example, by the desperate plea made last week by fruit growers in the east of England. This year they have seen a 14% drop in the number of applicants to come for the fruit-picking season from eastern Europe. The fear is that it will only get worse and could lead to the ridiculous situation of produce being left to rot in the fields of England and the whole country, all because of the attitude the Government have taken towards immigration.

Everything is a direct result of that policy, with the blurring of lines between asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants in the mind of far too many in this country, and we in this House have allowed that to happen—all those people being lumped together into one group is a negative for this country. Anything that can be done to drive down the immigration numbers to reach the Government’s ridiculous targets is being done by our civil servants on behalf of the Government.

The Government are paralysed by the policy, and sensible discussions or suggestions such as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald)—that students are taken out of the immigration numbers—the Government dare not do. They dare not be seen as backsliding, because they know they will be attacked by people from the far right. Instead of having the bottle to stand up and take them on, saying, “It’s the right thing to do because it’s what the people of this country need,” the Government are far too worried about the electoral consequences.

Everyone in this House will have seen immigration cases in their own case loads in recent months and years, with people saying that they, their family or dependants are not being allowed access to this country, whereas in the past they would have been allowed in on exactly the same applications. More and more obstacles are being put in the way of people simply as a mechanism to get the numbers down to a ridiculous target. If the Government were really serious about controlling immigration, they would start by putting real pressure on exploitative employers.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman was a very valued member of the Scottish Affairs Committee. I must say, on behalf of the Committee, that we miss him and we are very grateful for his remarks today. Does he share my concern with where we are going with all this? Currently, EU students can come to UK and Scottish universities uninhibited by any immigration rules. Maybe we will hear from the Minister himself, but does the hon. Gentleman share my fear that EU students might be treated similarly to non-EU international students? Will they also be expected to fall into all these immigration tests?

Mr Anderson: I thank the Chair of the Committee for his kind words. He is absolutely right. It is clear that the tone that is now set in this country is one of saying, “We don’t want strangers anymore.” We are not welcoming and that is abhorrent for people. I know that the Scottish people, people from my part of the country, and certainly people from where the Minister is from are not like that. We are warm, welcoming people. Virtually all of us who live on this island, somewhere down the line, are immigrants to this place. Hardly any of us can go back and say, “I’ve been here since the stone age,” and that has created a country and a nation that is at ease with itself, and that has welcomed and led the world in so many ways, but we are becoming narrow-minded and not the sort of people we want to be. I accept that people from around Europe will look at us and say, “Why would I go there? I should go somewhere else where I’ll be made to feel welcome.” It is a real worry.

Getting back to where I was, if the Government are really serious, they would be putting the pressure where it belongs and disincentivising exploitative employers who are abusing workers they bring to this country; properly policing the implementation of the national minimum wage; and ensuring that health and safety legislation was properly and fully adhered to on behalf of the immigrant workforce. If they were really serious, they would prevent immigrant workers being forced to live in conditions that would have shamed the hostels used in the apartheid days in South Africa, and stop employers using bonds to tie unhappy workers into contracts that are not worth the paper that, quite often, they are not even written on. Disincentivising exploitative employers would do more to reduce immigration numbers in this nation than any of the ridiculous schemes being promised so far that are so clearly failing.

The report should be a wake-up call for the Government. They should drop this sham of a policy and look instead at the real needs of the nation, at what has been said and at what this is about—the future of the country and the future of Scotland, which needs people to come in for the betterment of us all. Failure to do so is a detriment to us all. This report was done in good faith and it expresses the real needs of Scotland. It deserves a much better response than it has had so far.

2.43 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. If I may, I will leave a couple of minutes at the end for the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who moved the motion, to respond. I congratulate him on securing the debate and I congratulate all hon. Members who have participated on their valuable contributions to a spirited debate. Indeed, such has been the turnout for the Scottish National party, it has almost been like a scene from “Braveheart”. I welcome the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland. During my short time as Immigration Minister, I have faced seven Members of the Labour party across the Dispatch Box, and I have had seven slightly different takes on what Labour’s immigration policy might be. I hope we can get some clarity at some point.

It would be careless of me not to begin with the fact that the Scottish people knew, when they voted in the Scottish independence referendum, that issues such as
immigration and defence were not devolved matters. Therefore, the majority agreed that that should continue to be the situation. Incidentally, despite what the shadow Secretary of State said about my party’s attitude to Scotland, I want to put on the record that Scotland, like Yorkshire, is an important part of our country and that use of the word “colony” is really not appropriate. Perhaps the people in Scotland are slightly more generous than people from Yorkshire, but both are vital parts of our country. More Scots chose to vote Conservative than Labour in the last Scottish election. Indeed, many would say that Labour has become irrelevant in Scotland and that only the Conservatives are seen as offering a real choice for our people north of the border.

I am pleased to say that, on some key issues, there are no differences between any of us, whichever side of the border we are on. International students make an important contribution to UK educational institutions not just because of the income they bring, but because of the wider perspective they contribute and the lasting links they forge with this country. Let me be clear: there is no limit on the number of genuine international students who can come to study in the United Kingdom, and we have no intention of imposing any limit or cap. I hope that all hon. Members will acknowledge and welcome that fact. Let me also be clear about what that means in practice. The Government have taken seriously our duty to clear up the mess we inherited from the previous Government, including stopping more than 900 bogus institutions bringing in international students, and the number of genuine international higher education students has risen. Indeed, since 2010, the number of international students at Scottish universities has increased by 14%. I wish that those who seem to trade in doom and gloom would celebrate that fact and help the excellent universities in Scotland to flourish.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) raised a point about numbers falling. I point out that non-EU enrolments at Scotland’s Russell Group universities have increased. Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the University of Edinburgh’s numbers were up by 9%, and the University of Glasgow’s were up by 32%. That is a great achievement by some of our great institutions.

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman continually makes such points, but we must always bear in mind that many of those numbers are people who did not come here to study at all in some cases. They enrolled in bogus colleges intending not to study, but merely to take low-skilled jobs as a way of getting into the country and, in some cases, achieving residency in due course.

Let me turn to the issue of post-study work in Scotland, dealing first with the Fresh Talent—Working in Scotland scheme, which closed in 2008 because of its manifest limitations. An evidence review of the Fresh Talent scheme published by Scottish Government Social Research in 2008 refers to analysis of in-country applications conducted by the Border and Immigration Agency between June and August 2007, showing that a significant proportion of respondents were not in the types of job they would have liked to be in, with about four in 10 stating that their employment was not linked to their career choice, and more than half saying that it was not even appropriate to their level of education.

The Government closed the tier 1 post-study work route in April 2012. The route granted free access to the UK labour market for two years to international students who graduated in the UK. Too many individuals in the route were unemployed or in low-skilled work, and too many were using the student route as a means to work in the United Kingdom without any intention to study. We also saw a large number of fraudulent applications, which undermined our work routes and damaged the reputation of our education system. However, the closure of the two schemes does not mean that the United Kingdom fails to provide an attractive offer for international graduates of our universities. We have a generous offer for international students graduating from UK universities, which contains important safeguards to protect against abuse, the undermining of our work migration routes, and students being exploited by being used in low-skilled work or remaining in the United Kingdom unemployed.

With our current post-study provisions, the number of international students switching from tier 4 into tier 2 in the UK has been increasing. In 2015, the number was more than 6,000—up from around 5,500 grants in 2014, and around 4,000 grants in 2013. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire made the allegation that we will “boot them out”. That is not the case. He talked about people having to find a job in four months, which is also not the case. They can start looking for a job before they finish their course, and many participate in the famous milk round, in which employers go around universities before exams and graduation have been completed. The important point is that there is no limit, and never has been, on the number of international graduates of UK universities who can move into skilled jobs in the UK workforce. There is no limit on the number of tier 4 students who can move into tier 2 jobs. Students moving into skilled jobs do not count against the annual tier 2 general limit.

Another point was on students being able to stay for up to two or four months before switching. Four visa categories are available to non-European economic area graduates of UK universities who wish to remain in the UK to work. First, those with an offer of a graduate-level job that pays an appropriate salary may take sponsored employment through tier 2. Secondly, those who have been identified by their higher education institution or by UK Trade & Investment can stay on for up to two years to develop their businesses in the UK under the tier 1 graduate entrepreneur category. Thirdly, graduates wishing to undertake a period of professional training or a corporate internship related to their qualifications can do so under tier 5. Lastly, PhD students can stay in the UK for an extra year under the tier 4 doctorate extension scheme to look for work or to start their own business.

We need to be clear that this debate is not about skilled work or ensuring that graduate-level skills are available to Scotland. That is already provided for.
The Scottish National party is arguing for the right for international graduates to stay in this country to work in low-skilled and unskilled jobs. I fail to see how that benefits the economy of any part of the United Kingdom.

Although I recognise and welcome the work in Scotland to reduce unemployment rates—I note that there are still 129,000 unemployed people in Scotland—as in other parts of our country, the unemployment rate has fallen in recent years. Many of those people may already have the skills, or could acquire the skills, to take up jobs that do not require graduate training.

The other argument advanced by the SNP is that not having post-study work schemes makes the UK education sector less competitive than all our key international competitors. Perhaps we should look at the facts. An international student graduating from a UK university can stay in this country for at least two months after graduating, during which they can do whatever they like, including both working and looking for tier 2 employment that would allow them to stay on. If they have undertaken a course lasting more than a year, which covers the majority of international students in the UK, they can remain for four months.

The only country with a greater number of international students than the UK is the United States of America. In the United States international graduates, other than those undertaking work directly relevant to their degree, must leave the country within 60 days of completing their programme. In passing, I note that Canadian study permits become invalid 90 days after the conclusion of a study programme, which again is less generous than the position that applies to most international students in the UK. I hope we will not hear any more rhetoric about the UK’s uncompetitiveness on international students.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister is talking about the student visa itself. The US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand all have post-study work offerings that allow people to switch without, say, salary thresholds for 12 months or, in one case, 24 months. The Minister is not making a fair comparison.

Mr Goodwill: I have mentioned the four routes that graduates can take, but I make it clear that coming to the UK to study and obtain a degree is not a way into low-skilled work or unemployment. The vast majority of students come to the UK to study and then go back to contribute to their country’s economy. Indeed, on the statistics, those students do not contribute to net migration. If a person comes here to study and leaves at the end of their course, they do not contribute to net migration.

The hon. Members for Dundee West (Chris Law) and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) spoke of the tier 4 visa pilot. In recent months, some Scottish National party Members seem to have fixated on the claim that Scottish universities have somehow been deliberately and consciously excluded from the tier 4 visa pilot. The four universities chosen were selected objectively, with no prejudice—indeed, if there were prejudice, I suspect we would have had one in Yorkshire—and, as a result, the pilot includes the top four institutions based on their consistently low levels of visa refusals. There was no agenda to limit those involved to universities in any region of the UK.

The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) is keen on putting words in my mouth, and I am not saying that all institutions not currently involved in the pilot have a poor record of compliance. There are plenty of excellent institutions throughout the UK, including in Scotland. However, the four institutions participating in the pilot have the best record, which is why they have been chosen. We have deliberately kept it small scale, and I assure hon. Members that it will be properly evaluated. Should the pilot prove a success, it will be rolled out more widely—including, I hope, to universities in Scotland.

Finally, the Government continue to engage widely with the further and higher education sectors. Only yesterday, as has been mentioned, I met Dr Alasdair Allan, the Scottish Government’s Minister for International Development and Europe, to discuss these points.

I have time to touch on one or two other points. It was claimed that the number of Indian students coming to the UK has fallen by half, which should be viewed in the context of the clampdown on abuse. We issue more tier 4 visas to students from India than to students from any other country except China and the United States. The proportion of Indian students in the UK who are studying at a university has increased from some 50% in 2010 to some 90% in 2015. The trend of smaller volumes of students with greater concentrations in higher education is likely to reflect the recent policy changes to clamp down on immigration abuse by non-genuine students and bogus colleges. In 2015, some 90% of Indian students who applied for a tier 4 visa were issued one, which is up from 86% in 2014 and 83% in 2013. The Indian student grant rate is higher than in our competitor countries, and in quarter 3 of 2016 there was a 6% increase in the number of tier 4 visas issued to Indian students compared with 2015.

As anticipated, this has been a lively debate. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I reiterate that genuine students are welcome, and will continue to be welcome, in the United Kingdom. The UK has an enviable reputation as the home of world-class educational institutions, and the Government will continue to help them to ensure that they can continue bringing in the best and brightest students from across the globe to all parts of the UK, particularly Scotland.

Pete Wishart: Thank you for the opportunity to say a few quick words at the end of what has been an excellent debate, Mr Rosindell. I thank everyone who has helped out and participated in this important inquiry for the Scottish Affairs Committee. In the new Committee’s very early days, we were requested to look at these issues.

I take it from the Minister that that will be a no, then. We have made a sustained case, and it is not just the Scottish National party. Every sector in Scotland—higher education, the trade unions, representatives of business organisations and the Minister’s colleagues in the Scottish Parliament—is saying that post-study work schemes are required. He fails to recognise what post-study work schemes offer. It is not about trying to find unskilled employment, and there would be conditions on the type of employment that people would be expected to get. It is about giving people the opportunity to find and secure employment.
Nobody has told us that four months is adequate to secure such employment, particularly for £20,800. We suggested a few modest tweaks that could have helped to address the situation. I listened, but the Minister does not sound amenable to our proposals. Have a look at the regional cap for Scotland. It is a privilege that international students want to come to Scotland to study and that some decide to make Scotland their home. Give them a chance to find meaningful, constructive employment in Scotland that will enhance their community and develop our economy.

I will end with the words of Professor Diamond, who spoke of what happens when we have international students who value their experience here. They enrich our campuses and allow indigenous Scottish students to be educated in their company. They are also fantastic ambassadors when they go back to their country. If they have a positive experience of Scotland, it is carried for years and generations, resulting in goodwill towards our nation in the future. All we want is a chance for people who have chosen to come to Scotland to have an opportunity to find meaningful employment and to make a significant contribution. Scotland is different in our immigration and demographic requirements. We have a different set of population issues and challenges, and we need assistance in trying to address them. I hope the Government think once again about the Committee’s very modest demands.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Scottish Affairs Committee of Session 2015-16, Post-study work schemes, HC 593, and the Government response, HC 787.
the debate. Is he worried, as I am, that Her Majesty’s Government may be underestimating the extent to which the elephant population is declining? In a Government answer on 1 November—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. We must keep interventions short. A lot of people want to speak.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful for the intervention, Mrs Main. I agree that we perhaps run the risk of underestimating the problem. I am sure my hon. Friend will say more about it later.

I have been fortunate enough to spend 20% of my life in the beautiful country of Tanzania, and therefore fortunate to see elephants in the wild on many occasions. Tanzania has done a huge amount over the decades to protect wildlife by creating possibly the world’s finest network of national parks and game reserves. I declare an interest as chairman of the all-party group on Tanzania. One park in particular comes to mind. Our family stayed in a hut in the remote Ruaha national park in 1999. We lay awake listening to the noise of an elephant, possibly only two or three feet the other side of the tin wall, munching its way through the night. It was an extraordinary sound.

Of course, human-elephant cohabitation is not always easy. A friend of mine who farms coffee and maize on the outer slopes of the Ngorongoro crater showed us where elephants regularly come down from the forest to find salt. Sometimes they went further down, walking through the coffee, in which they were not interested, to the maize, in which they most certainly were. A herd of elephants could easily polish off a large field of maize in a night.

However, what we are speaking about today is not the result of human-elephant conflict, but the deliberate mass slaughter of elephants by criminal gangs who will stop at nothing—certainly not murder—to profit from ivory. Brave rangers who try to protect the elephants are outgunned and sometimes pay with their lives. Tanzania is estimated to have lost 60% of its elephants in the past five years, particularly in the Selous.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): This is a very important debate, and I am pleased that my hon. Friend has secured it. Does he agree that we should ask the Government to toughen up our own regulations to counter the problem, because we need to show leadership so that others will follow us?

Jeremy Lefroy: I will indeed say that in a moment.

What drives the slaughter? It is the demand for ivory around the world. As His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge has said,

“At the root of the illegal wildlife trade...is the demand for products that require the deaths of tens of thousands of these animals every year, pushing them further towards extinction.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire and I are therefore calling for an end, now, to the trade in ivory in the UK, and indeed the world. The World Wildlife Fund, Tusk and many other organisations support that closure, with small pragmatic exceptions such as connoisseur musical instruments, cutlery or furniture where ivory is a very small proportion of the item. However, even those exceptions need to be drawn tightly to avoid them becoming loopholes.

It will be rightly pointed out that an end to the ivory trade in the UK, or indeed the world, will not on its own lead to an end to demand and the consequent slaughter of elephants. Trade may be driven underground. I accept that; that is why I do not argue that bringing the trade to an end is the only measure we need to take. We should support the work of Governments in protecting elephants and other endangered species, as the United Kingdom is doing with assistance from the armed forces we are sending to Malawi next year. We need a global education campaign that shows people the reality of what is happening, so as to make the purchase of anything made from ivory unacceptable.

Local communities in and around conservation areas and national parks that host elephants and other endangered species need to see more of the benefit from tourism. The Conservative party manifestos in 2010 and 2015 committed to ending the ivory trade in the UK. We call on the Government to fulfil that commitment. They took an important step with the Secretary of State’s announcement in September of a ban on modern-day ivory sales, and I welcome that, but we need to go much further. My plea today is for the Government to do what the Governments of the United States and France have almost done—and what stands clearly in our manifesto—and bring an end to the trade in the UK.

3.8 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) on securing the debate and on his work in this area. It strikes me that there are a number of practical things we can do. The hon. Gentleman has highlighted one, and I will highlight two others that can add to his call for an absolute ban in this country. It would be good to have a Minister who acts while in post rather than waiting until being elevated to the House of Lords to shout. The power is there, and the people are in agreement with the Minister and the Government. Indeed, the more the petition circulated, the more tens of thousands added their names.

Too often, it seems to me, we in this place live for tomorrow, or perhaps for the next election—what can be done tomorrow and what was said yesterday. In this debate we are talking about the next generation. This year I happen to be able to talk for the first time as a grandfather, and I have another grandchild on the way in the next few weeks, which gives the subject added poignancy. What is being bequeathed to those two by me and everyone in Parliament?

In the summer I made a visit near to where the hon. Member for Stafford assiduously farms his coffee. I saw no elephants on the slopes of Kilimanjaro when I climbed it. I had a detailed look at mountain flere logs, going back over only 20 years, to find out what species those who ventured there not many years ago could see. What can be seen now? The answer is virtually nothing. Perhaps we in Parliament will do more than our little bit—something significant—for elephants and for other endangered species. I may buy for my grandkids’ visits little plastic toys like I had, of lions and tigers, elephants, polar bears and other species that are in grave danger of disappearing in my lifetime, never mind theirs, or of being consigned—a handful of them—to zoos, where they are kept, desperate. Yet in this country we are major traffickers in ivory—we are the third biggest in the world.
I recall 10 years ago getting through an amendment to one of the vast number of criminal justice Bills that made the trade in endangered species an imprisonable offence. There are wildlife officers in every police force in the country, but the number of successful prosecutions remains pitifully small. Yet in the antique markets and shops of this country, and on the internet—anywhere we might choose—ivory of the past and present is being traded. The figures about where it is coming from show that an extraordinary percentage is from Zambia. It is estimated that 37% of the ivory currently coming into the country is from there. Yet the European Union just last year changed its policy on ivory from Zambia. We in the western world are not getting the message about the heritage of the future.

**Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con):** Did the hon. Gentleman hear it mentioned on Radio 4 this morning that even giraffes are now being put on the endangered species list? That is for meat, not ivory, and it is shocking.

**John Mann:** It is estimated that there is a 40% reduction in the giraffe population. It is such a crisis for our world, which we share—we do not own it—and which we choose to concrete over, calling it economic growth. We choose to pretend the world is purely ours, but our species will not survive if we cannot cohabit with other species. In our selfishness we are putting future generations’ lives at stake, through our failure to act.

The hon. Member for Stafford is the expert on matters to do with Africa—I endorse that. He is wise in his advice to Government, and I am sure the House backs him in that. However, we can go further. There are little things we can do. Every delegation of MPs leaving this country should have a briefing about these issues in their hands, and should raise them in Africa and Asia. I raised with one of our ambassadors in central Asia the matter of the snow leopard. There are no elephants in Tajikistan, but there are snow leopards—more than anywhere else in the world. There are good people there, but there is no briefing from the Foreign Office, and the subject is not raised at ministerial level there. It is not being pressed, because it has not been part of our priority. Well, it needs to be. We have the people: we have senior royals and experienced, eloquent MPs. We should be able to do something about it.

Let us see trading standards acting in each part of the country, to find and to prosecute. Let our MPs, our ambassadors or anyone else we have abroad talk with the countries that will benefit if their indigenous species survive and thrive. Let that be significantly higher up the agenda—ours and theirs. Let the Government glory in their manifesto commitment, which is popular. There may even have been the odd vote—in constituencies other than mine—that went to their party for its wisdom in that respect. Let the policy be enacted, and swiftly, so that when we go into the negotiations on the convention on international trade in endangered species and press our case, it is on the basis that we have taken action domestically.

**Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** Does my hon. Friend share my frustration that too often manifestos contain commitments, such as the commitment to a ban on wild animals in circuses, but that despite ample parliamentary time in which to discuss the issues there is endless delay, further consultation, and no concrete action from the Government?

**John Mann:** The fact of the matter is that people vote, so we spend a lot of time listening to every single request.

I want to make a final point to those who are following the debate, and those who are enthused to do something from outside Parliament: I want to get the people to rise up and make demands of us, turn the arguments into numbers, and put pressure on me, the hon. Member for Stafford and every other Member of Parliament. We need a rising up in the country, to say that we are going to do something and are not prepared to sit by—as we have all done in our lifetime—while there is a disastrous decimation of species, and while species that were not endangered in my childhood become critically endangered. Let us turn the tide and put on the pressure. I say to the Minister: be a hero.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair):** Order. Six hon. Members wish to speak, and I shall be calling for the winding-up speeches to begin a couple of minutes before 4 o’clock. Perhaps the House will bear that in mind, otherwise I will impose a time limit.

3.17 pm

**Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) on securing and opening the debate, and commend the thoughtful contributions that he and the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) have made.

This year has seen the worst decline in the African elephant population in a quarter of a century, and it is escalating. It is estimated that only 352,271 savannah elephants are left, with approximately 120,000 illegally killed by poachers since the first Conservative manifesto commitment to close the domestic ivory market was made in 2010. I want the introduction of a near-total ban on ivory trading in the UK—one that eradicates the current pre/post-1947 divide. The only exception—this is the reason I refer to a near-total ban—would be for genuine pieces of art, of cultural value, ratified by independent experts such as museum experts. Evidence suggests that the most effective move that the UK could make to save elephants and combat illegal poaching would be closing the domestic ivory market, and that is what I am calling for.

I shall briefly outline the UK position before I explain why a near-total ban on ivory would be beneficial, primarily to boost elephant populations and prevent their slaughter, but also because it would combat criminal activity. It is supported by the public, as the hon. Member for Bassetlaw said. The Government have promised to deliver a ban, and we should keep our word.

On 21 September 2016, the UK announced a possible ban on the sale of worked ivory produced after 1947, works before that date would be considered antiques. The ban will be consulted on next year, but that is not soon enough. There is evidence that legislation can successfully combat the illegal killing of elephants. In
the US, the introduction of a near-total federal ban on ivory sales in July 2016 is already working well. Crucially, it also has support from the antiques industry; Sotheby’s called the move “manageable”, and stated that even when stricter legislation has been implemented, it has continued to operate successfully. The regulatory situation in the US indicates that the introduction of legislation in the UK could be effective. However, beyond that, a stronger sign is needed that more can and should be done and that more elephants can be saved without harming UK businesses.

Such measures are wholeheartedly supported by the British public. Only 8% of them are aware that it is still legal to buy and sell ivory in the UK, but 85% of them think that buying and selling ivory should be banned. It is one of our nation’s great traits that we are such proud animal lovers and express enormous concern for our planet’s wildlife. Introducing a near-total ban on domestic ivory would give the British people what they want: legislation to protect elephants, which are animals as majestic as any other. The Conservative party knows that people want elephants protected. In our 2010 and 2015 manifestos, we said that we would press for a total ban on ivory sales. It is right that we deliver on those commitments, because we made them.

Crucially, although public awareness about the ivory trade’s legality is not huge, it does not mean that the Conservative decision not to fully implement those manifesto ambitions has gone unnoticed. Tusk, the wildlife conservation charity, criticised the Government, saying that the proposals introduced “do not represent a near-total ban as promised”.

Just three days after the consultation on the modern-day ivory ban was announced in September this year, the grassroots organisation Action for Elephants UK sent the Prime Minister a letter with 124 signatories, including Lord Hague, Stephen Hawking and the nation’s beloved broadcaster and naturalist David Attenborough. Finally, a current e-petition calling for the domestic ivory market to be shut down has reached more than 75,000 signatures. A near-total ban would prove to those groups and the wider public that the Government are committed to protecting endangered species and take citizens’ concerns extremely seriously.

Unfortunately, in terms of legislation—I touched on this briefly—Britain currently lags behind several countries in protecting elephants and restricting the ivory trade. Alongside the USA, China has also gone further than the UK in terms of regulation. The two countries have put in place stricter laws than are required under the convention on international trade in endangered species of wild fauna and flora, which, although it confusingly only mentions fauna and flora in its name, aims to ensure that the international trade in wild animals does not threaten their survival.

On 20 March 2016, China imposed a three-year suspension on importing all ivory tusks and carvings. In June 2016, the Hong Kong Government introduced plans to phase out the domestic ivory trade entirely within five years, as well as bans on the import and re-export of pre-convention ivory into the territory. In the same month, the USA implemented new rules on the domestic trade in ivory, under which the commercial sale and export of ivory between US states are allowed only for certified antiques more than 100 years old.

Recent conferences, such as November’s international conference in Vietnam on the illegal wildlife trade, attended by the Duke of Cambridge, Prince William, and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, are key examples of how countries’ treatment of the ivory trade can be put into the global spotlight. That conference was the third conference, the first of which was hosted by the UK Government in 2014. Through the meetings, nations have committed to supporting the elephant protection initiative, which includes measures on closing domestic ivory markets. After making such pledges, Britain must take care that we are not shamed on the international stage or left behind by our neighbours. Introducing a near-total ban on ivory in the UK would prove our conviction to the world. Britain should be leading from the front, not limping behind other nations.

A more immediate and tangible reason for introducing a near-total ban than protecting British reputation is the horrendous illegal slaughter of elephants, which has reached an appalling level. The great elephant census, released in September this year, found that the number of African elephants plunged by 30%, or around 144,000, between 2007 and 2014. It is not possible to understand the scale of the slaughter without also understanding the scale of the illegal ivory trade.

Mr Hollobone: In an answer to my hon. Friend on 1 November, the Government said that only 111,000 African elephants had disappeared in the last 10 years. Does she share my concern that the Government are underestimating the scale of the problem?

Pauline Latham: Yes, I am not sure where those figures came from, but other independent people and organisations have come up with much bigger figures, and the problem is escalating. It is not at a flat level or decreasing; it is escalating. They are being killed faster and more frequently.

The illicit wildlife trade is considered the fourth most profitable international crime after drugs, arms and human trafficking. It is worth between $10 billion and $20 billion each year. Ivory makes up a significant proportion of that market, and an estimated 200 to 300 tonnes of illegal ivory enter the global market every year. Given the value of ivory, the brutality directed towards elephants becomes increasingly predictable, although no less despicable. The word “poaching” may conjure up the image of small, individual instances of killing, but the term does not convey the horror of frequent butchery.

In an article in The New York Times, Ugandan Eve Abe describes how, after Idi Amin’s overthrow, both armies involved in the conflict would throw hand grenades at families of elephants and then cut out their ivory. Those armies are no longer present, but to assume that the brutal killing of those animals and the use of the profits to fund terrorist and militia activity have disappeared with them is, unfortunately, incorrect. As long as current UK legislation inadvertently helps ivory trading remain that profitable, the killing will continue.

Tragically, that killing affects more than animals. The Thin Green Line Foundation estimates that around 1,000 wildlife officers have been killed in the past decade. Not all of those deaths will have been due to ivory
poachers, but the statistic proves that there is a human as well as an animal cost from the illegal ivory trade market.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Lady continues with her remarks, I encourage her to finish by at least 3.30, so other hon. Members have a chance to speak.

Pauline Latham: Thank you, Mrs Main. I will skip the statistics that I have, although they are important. The Government have an opportunity to make a big difference to the world, not just to Britain. We have an important opportunity to discuss, and ultimately to fight, the appalling slaughter of elephants being driven by the ivory trade. We are seeing the massacre of magnificent animals that face ever-increasing threats from poaching, including potential extinction.

The largest tusk are from the oldest elephants, who are the first in herds to be killed. Elephants live in family units. If the oldest, wisest elephants are slaughtered, the unit is left incomplete, and many of the “teenage” elephants lose their role model. Just like human teenagers, they can run wild. Many of those rogue elephants can become extremely violent. The extension of the domestic ivory ban offers a simple and effective way to protect elephants, and I hope that everyone here will support it.

I have said before in this very hall that, like the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), I fear that my grandchildren and great-grandchildren may never see elephants, given the increasing scale of their deaths. I reiterate that fear today, but I hope that it is the last time I must do so.

3.29 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) on securing this debate on the back of a very popular petition, as well as the other hon. Members who I know have campaigned on this issue for a long time. It is clear from this debate that there is a collective will across party political lines for the UK to do more to protect the world’s elephants. As the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) said, they are the most magnificent animals.

I very much support the aims of this debate and the call for a complete ban on the domestic ivory trade in the UK. As other hon. Members have said, 30,000 elephants are still killed every year for their tusks—a death rate of one every quarter of an hour. Africa’s elephant population is in serious decline, mainly because of high levels of poaching: 30% of Africa’s elephants have disappeared in seven years. That ongoing tragedy was highlighted really well in the excellent programmes made by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. We should also appreciate the plight of endangered Asian elephants, as the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) pointed out.

The Government’s announcement in September of a ban on the sale of worked ivory produced after 1947 is a step in the right direction but, as other hon. Members have said, there is still more that can and should be done. I thank my constituent Rob Hepworth, who is a former head for the convention on international trade in endangered species and an officer for the UN convention on migratory species, for his work. I also thank all the non-governmental organisations that briefed us for this debate on their campaigns. On Mr Hepworth’s behalf, I reiterate that it is felt that the Government’s proposals are too limited because they do not include older ivory products. Illegal ivory is often laundered and falsely claimed to be old ivory. As we have seen from the programmes and from work done by wildlife monitoring organisations, there is extensive evidence of current abuse and of ivory being smuggled to overseas markets, mainly Hong Kong.

On my constituent’s behalf, may I also raise with the Minister the Government’s actions at EU level? It is felt that they missed an important opportunity to act at the recent CITES conference in South Africa when they supported the European Commission delegation’s block vote denying maximum protection status to all African elephants. That action not only seemed to negate the pledges made in the last two Conservative manifestos to “press for a total ban on ivory sales” but simultaneously contradicted the Foreign Secretary’s criticism of the EU Commission at the Conservative party conference, in which he slammed the “absurd” EU veto on an ivory ban. Will the Minister explain why the Government acted in that way at the conference? That would really help campaigners out there.

It would also be good to get some clarity on whether the Minister is seriously considering stricter national measures to ban the UK domestic ivory trade altogether. While we remain in the EU, it would be useful to know whether she can press Brussels to amend the binding regulations that allow unrestricted sales in allegedly antique ivory without any checks or certificates, so that in effect EU countries would have to regulate ivory sales, too.

We can change the law, but—as my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) asked—what consideration are the Government giving to enforcement? Will they give more resources to agencies such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs wildlife inspectorate, the national wildlife crime unit, the police and Border Force for extra enforcement support? That is really important.

Finally, on behalf of Rob Hepworth, may I ask what consideration is being given to the destruction of stockpiles? I understand that the US, France, China and African states have publicly destroyed ivory to highlight the trade. Have the Government considered that? The public certainly support more action on the ivory trade; in October, as has been mentioned, more than 100 conservationists, campaigners and politicians signed an open letter to the Government to that effect. It would be good to hear from the Minister what more we in the UK can do to lead the way and to help to secure a future for wild elephants while supporting the local communities that live alongside these extraordinary creatures.

3.34 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on this extremely serious subject. I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for introducing the debate.

I want to start by telling a story about an experience that convinced me that we absolutely have to do our utmost to protect these precious animals, aside from all the appalling statistics that we have heard today and
that many of us know so well. This summer, I was fortunate enough to go to the northern part of Kenya. My husband and I stayed in a camp called Sarara on Namunyak Wildlife Conservation Trust land in 75,000 acres of glorious countryside. Pretty much all the camp’s profits are ploughed back into the community and into protecting the wildlife and habitats of which elephants are a key part.

Let me give some of the background history. The northern districts of Kenya were at the centre of mass elephant poaching in the 1980s: hundreds of elephants were killed for their ivory and the population was virtually wiped out. People soon realised that the wildlife had no future unless the communities themselves could participate in its protection, including by protecting the land, which was becoming eroded and over-grazed. To succeed, a presence had to be established in the bush to deter poachers and protect the elephant population and the local communities had to be convinced that the wildlife was not competition for food but a source of income. Initially, the local herdsmen were provided with radios so that they could report poaching incidents. As time went on, the community began to understand the benefits of having wildlife on their land. Visitors like my husband and I who were interested in the wildlife could be used as a source of income. The Samburu people of Namunyak have learned that, correctly managed, the land can generate a more sustainable income for the community and also protect the elephant herds and their habitats.

On our visit, we were also fortunate to go to the opening of a unique elephant sanctuary that was set up by the people of the community with a lot of guidance from very good consultants and charities working there. It is an elephant orphanage; some of the elephants it gathers up have fallen down wells, but others have become orphans because their parents have been killed by poaching. It is an essential establishment.

I want to highlight a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham): when an elephant is poached, it affects not just that one elephant but the entire herd. Elephants are deeply intelligent and emotional creatures; losing one member can devastate the herd’s whole set-up. It is like a family member being knocked off. Elephants live in fluid, intergenerational, predominantly female herds and flourish under leadership. The matriarch is often the elephant that is killed, because it is the biggest, the grandest-looking and the one the poachers want, and losing it can confuse the herd. Their roaming patterns change and that can be the difference between life and death for elephants. Understanding the deep intelligence of these creatures makes killing them for a tiny part of their body for jewellery even more abhorrent.

There are documented examples of elephants swimming across a river to Namibia by night, where they eat as much vegetation as they can and—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Could the hon. Lady bring her remarks back to the UK ivory trade? Other Members want to speak; background information is very interesting, but time is short.

Rebecca Pow: Thank you, Mrs Main. I will move straight on to the ivory trade; I was just illustrating why it is so shocking and why I am calling for the ban to be extended. A complete ban on all ivory sales would make such a difference to these deeply sensitive and intelligent creatures.

I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to a consultation, but I gently remind the Minister that a pledge to ban all ivory sales in the UK has been in the Conservative manifesto for some time. I urge her to shed some light on how we might move that forward. I know that many believe in the status quo and the ban on post-1947 ivory to discourage poached ivory arriving in the UK market, but I do not believe that those measures would do the trick. Allowing any ivory trade at all leaves a place for illegal ivory to be hidden. There are ways of making modern ivory look old, as was recognised recently at the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s world conservation congress, which voted to close down domestic ivory markets around the world.

Some will argue that we should take care of the small number of antique dealers in this country whose trade potentially relies on ivory. I understand that tests can be carried out to try to prove whether ivory is pre or post-1947, but they are costly and take a long time, and they are often not actually carried out. It falls to the UK’s Border Force to police the ivory trade. Shockingly, over the past five years, 40% of its seizures have been ivory. Good work is also done by the national wildlife crime unit, and I applaud the Government for saving it.

I am winding up now, Mrs Main, but you may remember that I mentioned those elephants swimming to Namibia. They swam from Botswana, which is a safe haven because it signed up to the elephant protection initiative. I wonder why, when we are urging other countries to join such initiatives, we do not share their values, join the initiatives and ban our highly damaging domestic ivory market. We can do that quite simply. It would be cheap, and we would have enormous public support. We could prove that, yet again, we are a world leader, and take a stand against organised crime and the dreadful poaching that has had such a terrible knock-on effect in many of the countries we have been discussing. Some good news is that Stop Ivory has commissioned a legal opinion, which states that only secondary legislation would be required for a complete ban to be enacted. I would be happy to share that opinion with the Minister.

To conclude, as I said earlier, I welcome the Government’s consultation on this issue. I urge the Minister to ensure that the Government consult on a ban on all ivory sales so that we can move towards a complete ivory ban. We cannot carry on as we are; it is much too high a price for our precious elephants to pay.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Margaret Ferrier, I should inform the other Members who wish to speak that there is now a six-minute limit on speeches.

3.41 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Main. I thank the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for securing this important debate, and
pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) for her efforts. I was only too happy to support her, given that previously I have failed in several applications for a Westminster Hall debate on the same topic.

I, along with many of my SNP colleagues, have been particularly passionate about the ivory trade. Indeed, earlier this year, my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan) tabled an early-day motion calling on the UK Government to fulfil their pledge to ban the domestic ivory trade. Although the Government’s recent announcement of a ban on non-antique ivory is welcome, I urge them to build on that and go a step further. Some would argue that the new ban is a watered-down version of the Government’s manifesto commitment to “press for a total ban on ivory sales”, which was itself arguably a watered-down version of the 2010 manifesto pledge not only to introduce a ban, but to press for “the destruction of existing stockpiles”.

The International Fund for Animal Welfare warns that the demand for ivory to make decorative items, jewellery and trinkets is pushing elephants to the brink of extinction. That sobering fact is reason in itself to show the trade zero tolerance. Although the IFAW welcomes the partial ban as a “positive step in the right direction”, it is continuing to urge the Government to introduce a total ban on domestic ivory sales, as it believes that such a measure is vital to help to shut down the markets in the UK. Most people will be unaware of this fact, but the UK actually has the largest legal domestic ivory market in Europe. Information obtained from the Border Force and the Metropolitan police indicates that the UK is home to a significant illegal market. Furthermore—the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) referred to this briefly—there is evidence to suggest that some traders attempt to stain or disguise newer items in order to pass them off as antiques. It is for that very reason that a total ban is imperative.

The ban on the sale of worked ivory produced after 1947, although welcome, still enables a rogue trade in such items. It is simply not effective enough. A total ban is required if we are truly to stamp out the trade. The other effect of a total ban would be to make ivory undesirable and socially unacceptable. Ivory should not be viewed as a commodity, and should have absolutely zero monetary value. The real cost of ivory is the extinction of elephants from our planet. Too many elephants suffer horrific deaths that are totally needless. It is important to put a number to that. If more people understood the sheer scale of the trade, I am sure there would be greater public uproar.

The UK should be leading the way and providing an example to the rest of the world. Time is running short for elephants. We need to see further action from the Government, building on the work already done. I would like to see the Government undertake a consultation on how to close the ivory market, looking at our domestic and international obligations. The ban needs to be strengthened to fulfil properly the Conservative manifesto commitment to ban the domestic trade. That must include ending the sale of pre-1947 ivory. I look forward to the Government’s response to the points raised today, and thank the Minister for her consideration of this matter.

3.45 pm

Victoria Borwick (Kensington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I declare that I am president of the British Antique Dealers’ Association. I have also been advised by the British Art Market Federation, the Antiquities Dealers’ Association and LAPADA, which together comprise a group of Britain’s most knowledgeable and highly regarded auction houses and specialist dealers in fine art, antiques and the decorative arts. I hope that this timely debate, secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), will provide an opportunity to discuss a number of misunderstandings.

As the MP for Kensington, my constituency includes antique dealers and institutions containing world-renowned collections of cultural objects—notably, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum, all of which have worked ivory and other natural materials in their collections. The V&A houses not only medieval and baroque ivory, but ivory from the early 20th century.

The most important point I need to make is that the antiques trade does not support the killing of elephants, nor does it support any system that allows raw ivory from post-1947 sources to be traded. I emphasise that all the dealers and auctioneers I have spoken to are deeply concerned about the plight of African elephants and deplore their slaughter. They, and the vast majority of antiques collectors, want nothing to do with items made from modern or poached ivory. They welcome the tougher measures proposed by the Minister to remove from sale objects that are little more than tourist trinkets made in the past few decades. Even more importantly, we would all welcome a ban on the export and trading of raw tusks from other EU member states. We have already led the field by banning them ourselves some time ago.

The UK has the second largest art and antiques industry in the world. Collectively, the pool of expertise represented by all those businesses throughout the UK amounts to a resource that is unsurpassed by any other country. Visitors flock to these shores to sell or acquire artworks. Our museums rely on and work with the trade to continue to develop their collections. In fact, at a meeting a few months ago representatives of the V&A explained how they are still enhancing their collections of significant 20th century ivory pieces.

Ivory has been used in European decorative arts for centuries. I have available and can pass around a document compiled by the British Art Market Federation that gives some examples. Antique items containing ivory, such as musical instruments, can be found in the homes of many people in Britain. One of the great misunderstandings about the antiques trade is when people regard all ivory as part of an ivory market; however, the purchaser of a carved ivory medieval Christian diptych who wants the ivory because it is a beautifully worked, culturally and historically significant
piece that happens to be made of ivory is not the same as a buyer of modern-day trinkets. To ban the sale of an 18th-century cabinet inlaid with small pieces of ivory, or the sale of an 18th-century portrait miniature painted on a thin sliver of ivory, in order to stop far eastern buyers purchasing contemporary carved Buddhas or trinkets, makes no sense. We need to be intelligent enough to differentiate the two.

The majority of ivory buyers in the far east appear not to be interested in objects of cultural significance. What they want is ivory as a material, and thus we must distinguish between raw tusks and antique objects. In places such as Hong Kong, which is a destination for illegally poached tusks, illicit tusks can be mixed with older tusks, which continue to be exported by some European countries. The EU has plans to introduce a total ban on the export of raw tusks, and the sooner such a ban is implemented the better.

No one has so far demonstrated that genuine antiques containing ivory, of the type sold in the UK and found in our museums, contribute in any material way to the sale of poached ivory in the far east. The World Wide Fund for Nature-backed TRAFFIC report concluded that “alleged links between the UK antiques trade and the poaching crisis appear tenuous at best”.

In conclusion, the antiques trade in the UK has made it clear that it welcomes working with my hon. Friend the Minister to develop the further regulations that may be necessary to remove from sale post-1947 items, which will effectively be a ban, because it is very important that we all understand the difference. We all welcome greater checks to ensure that only genuine antique items are sold—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I call Dr Lisa Cameron.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mrs Main. It is also an absolute pleasure to speak in such a profound—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I apologise; I am sorry. I call Fiona Bruce for the last few minutes before the Front-Bench speeches. Sorry about that.

3.52 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Thank you, Mrs Main. On 24 September 2016, the third annual global march for elephants and rhinos took place, with people from 140 cities worldwide uniting to call for a ban on the trade in ivory and horn, and to demand that action be taken to end the irrevocable damage caused by the acquisition and trade of ivory. I commend the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for securing the debate and support him in his call for Members to recognise the irrevocable damage that will be caused both to elephant species and to individuals’ livelihoods if action is not taken.

I particularly commend the excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham). She articulated so well how a near-total ban on ivory trade is the way ahead. I very much support such a ban and, as I say, she expressed very well how an “intelligent” differentiation can be made, to use the word of my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Victoria Borwick), between museum pieces and genuine antique objects and other ivory, so that we can not only ensure that there is that distinction but at the same time put an end to and cut off the source of funding for the brutal killers who are poaching elephants in Africa and elsewhere.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire mentioned, a survey of elephants in August 2016—the great elephant census—showed the severe fall in the number of African elephants. The figures that have been mentioned in the debate vary, but it is clear that there has been a severe decline. If the current level of poaching in Africa continues, elephants could be all but extinct by 2030, and certain species will experience an extreme decline even earlier. For example, the African forest elephant has declined by 65% since 2002, giving it only another decade before extinction. The gravity of the need to act on the ivory trade is undeniable.

However, the different species of African elephants are not the only victims of the ivory trade. I saw that on a visit to Tanzania about two years ago, when I was privileged to be invited to go on a safari. We saw many, many animals, but we saw no elephants, and the guide explained to us that the decline in elephants was a serious deterrent to tourists visiting the area, which would have an increasing impact on the jobs and livelihoods of the people living in that area unless something was done.

Those of us on the International Development Committee—including my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford and for Mid Derbyshire, and others who are here today—know that this is a critical issue to be addressed in Africa today, particularly for the younger generation. I particularly ask that the Department for International Development considers whether there is more that it could do to support those dealing with this issue in the countries in which we are spending UK aid.

The responsibility that Britain must take in tackling the ivory trade cannot be ignored. The domestic market means that there is a transition point in the UK for the trading of ivory, with import and re-export occurring. Between 2009 and 2014, 40% of seizures by the UK Border Force were of ivory items.

There has been some progress. I am pleased to see the Government’s commitment to doubling their £13 million investment to tackle the illegal ivory trade and the endeavours to train a British military anti-poaching force. Those are bold and leading measures to tackle the problem, but more must be done. I join other Members in asking the Government to take further steps to close the ivory market, in order to rid Britain of the status of a major market for trading ivory, and to impose a near-total ivory ban.

In recent years, international collaboration has been very encouraging. I welcome the announcements by the USA and China within the past year regarding the banning of the ivory trade, and more recently the announcements by Hong Kong and France. I urge the Government to join that international movement and to recognise the urgency of action on the ivory trade. Without a near-total ban on the ivory trade in the UK, we will neglect not only to counteract the rapid decline of African elephants but to support the livelihoods of many people in developing countries who have been
[Fiona Bruce]  

crippled by the ivory market. It would be to the shame of our country, and indeed our Government, if we lagged behind other countries that are currently taking a lead on tackling this issue.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): I call Dr Lisa Cameron. As the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Lady has 10 minutes. I apologise for getting her jumping to her feet a little earlier.

3.57 pm  
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship once again so soon, Mrs Main.

I am privileged to speak in such a profound and important debate. First, I commend the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for bringing this issue to the House. He has great experience and speaks from the heart. I also thank the International Fund for Animal Welfare, the Born Free Foundation, the World Wide Fund for Nature, Tusk and many other organisations and agencies that work so hard to conserve the wonderful, majestic elephant population of our world.

The hon. Gentleman outlined with great veracity the need for this debate; the need to stop the decline in elephant numbers, which are currently at 400,000 to 450,000; the grave issues that exist regarding poaching; the emergency of the situation that we face internationally; his own personal experience in Africa, in Tanzania and beyond; the need to end the ivory trade now; in fulfilment of the Conservative party election pledges; and the global need for education campaigns for children, to spread the word.

I also thank the esteemed and hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for his contribution. He spoke, as always, with great emotion. He spoke about the people’s petition and the people’s voice—the people who assert the need to save endangered species for the sake of the next generation. He made the excellent point that we want to conserve elephants in the world and not just visit them in zoos. He also described the important issues that MPs have a responsibility to raise on every delegation visit we have to countries where there are endangered species. MPs, ambassadors, Ministers and the United Kingdom Government can and must do more.

There was an eloquent contribution from the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), who I know feels especially strongly about this issue and who will work hard, as always, to achieve concrete results. She raised the important issue of combating criminal activity as part of the overall strategy and emphasised the urgent need for action. She wants to see the UK be a role model and lead the world on taking this issue forward, because currently we are falling behind. She also raised the important issue of the escalation in the illicit wildlife trade.

The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) made an excellent contribution, as always. She informed the Chamber that 30% of Africa’s elephants have disappeared. She raised the issue of the UK Government’s action at EU level, which has sadly been lacking. She asked about the destruction of stockpiles and the Government’s lack of action to date in that regard.

The hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) made a thoughtful contribution. She spoke about her experience of the majestic elephant and of visits to elephant sanctuaries, and about the importance of tourism to local livelihoods and sustainability.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) urged the UK Government to take steps towards implementing a total ban on ivory. She highlighted that the cost of ivory is the extinction of elephants from our planet.

Pauline Latham: The hon. Lady mentions all these things and asks what the Government are going to do, but they have said that they plan to widen the UK ban on ivory sales. Would she like the Minister to respond to that point and explain exactly what it means?

Dr Cameron: Yes, I would like the Minister to explain in detail what the Government mean to do on the issue.

The hon. Member for Kensington (Victoria Borwick) gave a perspective from her constituency regarding antiques dealers and museums. She indicated that antiques dealers would welcome tough measures on the sale of ivory and are aware of the plight of the elephant population across the world. They advocate a ban on the export of tusks.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)—I nearly made my speech before she had even had a chance to speak—made a measured speech, as always. She emphasised the severe decline in the elephant population and spoke about the International Development Committee’s work, to which she has dedicated herself. She raised the important issue of jobs and livelihoods and asked that the Department for International Development does more to protect wildlife in the countries in which it is active.

This year, my two-year-old daughter saw an elephant for the very first time. It was an amazing experience that she will never forget, and I want future generations of children to be able to behold that sight. Time is of the essence. We must act now. If we do not, elephants could face localised extinction. In some African countries, including Senegal, Somalia and Sudan, elephants have already been driven to extinction. Communities across Africa are dependent on elephants for income through tourism, so saving elephants also means preventing poverty, sustaining livelihoods and promoting sustainable tourism.

Elephants are a key species in the ecosystem, and many other animals rely on them for survival. Elephants are nature’s gardeners. Plants and trees rely on them to disperse seeds. Elephants, as has been mentioned, are intelligent and emotional. They grieve for lost ones and feel fear and joy. We must stem demand for ivory from consumer countries. That is fundamental to the survival of the species. Up to 100 elephants are killed by organised criminals every day. In the past 10 years, 1,000 rangers have been killed by poachers.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Lady bring her remarks to a close? There are two Front Benchers still to go.

Dr Cameron: We need conviction rates and justice systems to be strengthened.
I ask that we protect and preserve elephants for the world. If the UK Government do not take steps to act on such a fundamental issue, we must question their fitness to represent the United Kingdom across the world.

The clock is ticking. In the course of this debate, six more elephants will be murdered. The time for consultation is over; it is time for action, and we must start today. We have had opportunities on the global stage. I will not be critical—it is very difficult to bring global progress—but we have to show leadership with those opportunities.

The Government have clearly made commitments, but we want to see them fulfilled, not just in the UK, but on the global stage. They should not stand back from those commitments to move forward; they should show leadership and take people along with them, whether at CITES conferences or in Hanoi.

I have spoken to the general of the 1st (United Kingdom) Division of the Army—it is based in my constituency and long may it remain there. I am talking about using our armed forces and their skill to protect elephants in Africa. We would welcome such steps because, clearly, this is a war against mass criminality. We need to take such actions and use our skills.

Can the Minister tell me the difference between ivory of 1946 and of 1948? Elephants fell to their deaths in 1946 and 1948, so what is the difference in the false demarcation of 1947? Authorities and dealers cannot tell the difference. We have heard that only carbon dating can provide the necessary identification. The demarcation is false, so why draw that line? Why not just say, “Pre-1947 and post-1947 ivory will be banned”? We will support the Government if they take that forward. We want to know from the Minister why the Government will not address the antique ivory trade. What is so different?

The remarks of the hon. Member for Kensington (Victoria Borwick) were objectionable. She referred to a beautifully worked piece, but it was a beautiful elephant once. She called it artwork. What is artistic about murder? Although those pieces are already in existence, they should no longer be traded. We would introduce a total ban on all ivory, with no excuses and no demarcations—a clear and simple ban. We call for leadership from the Government on this issue.

I agree with Action for Elephants UK, which states:

“The existence of a legal ivory trade serves as a cover for illegal sales of ivory, while continuing to perpetuate the cycle of supply and demand.”

We must see a ban on historical and new ivory, and I call on the Government to close the ivory loophole today and for the Minister to be bold enough to do that, on her watch and while she has the power to make the difference around the globe. Tougher penalties are needed for those who break the law and education campaigns should coincide with that, as well as an amnesty on those that possess ivory in their own homes, so that they can get rid of those products, which are not beautiful artworks but products paid for by the blood of animals.

Let us get on top of the cyber trade too. Let us get on top of the reality of the issue and see a total ban. In our time in Europe, let us use our influence while it remains to see European countries coming behind our leadership on this issue. At the moment, France is ahead of us. We know that the US, too, has tougher penalties. We have to play catch-up. We also have to listen to countries such as Botswana, where the largest elephant population lives, which is also calling for a total ban. We have to listen to those that know best.

This is not just a fight for the future of elephants and rhinos and so many animals—it is a fight against organised criminality. That is why it is so important that we as a country step up and refuse to tolerate any of it. Where there are loopholes and confusion, which is what the Government measures will bring, criminality will continue, because that is what criminals do. I ask the Minister to please join us—the 85% of people across our country
and hon. Members today—and call for a total ban. It is on her watch and she has the ability to make the change. I trust she will.

4.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) on securing this debate. As has already been pointed out, nearly 77,000 people have signed the petition calling for a total ban and I am sure that the Petitions Committee has linked that to this debate.

Hon. Members have spoken with passion. We have heard about the trade in ivory and its links to the trafficking of poached ivory. That is what it comes back to—the horrific poaching of elephants that is currently taking place. We all agree that it has to stop; we will not stand aside while there is the threat of extinction.

Many hon. Members have expressed their love of elephants, and I admit to that too. In 1977, I saw the appropriately named Jubilee in Chester zoo, and earlier this year I visited South Africa to attend the Conference of the Parties to the convention on international trade in endangered species and saw in Kruger national park elephants roaming wild, as they should be.

One Member asked about international aid. The reason I went to Kruger national park was to see the work being done with UK taxpayers’ money through the aid system to train rangers to prevent the poaching of rhinos. In South Africa, there seems to have been a measure of success; instead of three rhinos being poached a day, we now have one rhino being poached a day. That is some success, but those are still horrific figures.

Kerry McCarthy: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Dr Coffey: I will not yet—I need to open my speech. The Government are absolutely committed to taking the action needed and showing the required leadership to end the poaching crisis.

A lot of statistics have been cited today, several of which I do not recognise. I would be happy to understand them further. It is my understanding that, at its peak in 2011, it was estimated that 30,000 African elephants were slaughtered in a year for their tusks, based on extrapolations from data from 12 key sites. The International Union for Conservation of Nature reported the loss of 111,000 in the great elephant census, which was announced at the recent CITES COP and was the basis of the parliamentary answer that I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham). The 2014 African elephant census, which is collated by a different organisation, provides the most recent and comprehensive data and indicates a 30% fall in the savannah elephant population in a seven-year period between 2007 and 2014. That equates to 144,000 elephants.

Pauline Latham: Does it really matter what the statistics are? Is it a few thousand here or a few thousand there. They are being slaughtered and bloody corpses are on the ground.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right—that is why I alluded to that point in the opening of my speech—but I want to make sure that we are clear in the assertions that are made. I do not Recognise some of the statistics to which she refers. The general consensus is that the levels of poaching peaked in 2011 to 2013, but I agree that one poached elephant is one too many. I fully accept that.

What the overall numbers hide is the vastly different experiences across the African continent. Tanzania has been particularly hit hard by poaching, especially in the Selous region, with a reported decline of more than 60,000 elephants, which is a significant part of the population. Conversely, the experience in other parts of Africa, especially in the southern states, is of a stable or growing population. For example, in the Hwange national park in Zimbabwe, the population is growing and the Government report that they are beginning to suffer the problems of overpopulation, including habitat destruction.

The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) referred to the EU. Our Government’s view is that the large and growing elephant populations in southern Africa did not meet the clear, scientific criteria established in CITES for inclusion in appendix I of the convention. Moreover, moving those populations to appendix I would have had no impact on the status of the ivory from those four countries, or the concern that trade might resume in the future. Their existing appendix II listings have an annotation that effectively treats ivory from those countries as, if it were in appendix I. Such a move could in fact have been counter-productive. It was strongly thought that Zimbabwe, Namibia and possibly more countries would have taken out a reservation against any move to appendix I. Two countries taking out such a reservation would have resulted in ivory being able to be traded without contravening CITES and so would have potentially reopened commercial trade in new ivory with immediate effect.

A range of solutions is needed to tackle the poaching crisis and CITES, which also covers both fauna and flora, is an important part of that. I recognise that this debate is about the UK ivory trade, but we should be conscious that many species were added to appendix I, including sharks and rosewood. The illegal wildlife trade covers far more than just the ivory to which we are referring today.

I assure hon. Members that the UK was an active participant in discussions to give a clear direction to close national ivory markets where they fuel poaching or illegal trade. That was an outcome we strongly endorse. There was also decisive action to strengthen national ivory action plans—I have met Ministers from China and Vietnam and we have discussed those matters—which set out clear actions for countries to combat ivory trafficking in key markets, with scrutiny of achievements by the CITES community up to and including trade sanctions for inaction.

The current global rules under CITES are that trade in ivory dating from after 1990 is banned. There is no time limit to that. To change that would require a positive decision by two thirds of the CITES parties to embrace trade in ivory, which is not a realistic prospect. The UK has already for a number of years gone further than CITES requirements. We do not permit exports of any ivory tusks, given the very obvious potential for such international trade to be used to launder recently poached ivory tusks.
The rules around what trade in ivory is permitted are only part of the story and how they are enforced is an essential element. Within the UK, the existing legal trade is enforced by the Border Force. Ivory is a top priority for the Border Force’s wildlife trafficking team. The petition for today’s debate notes that 40% of UK customs seizures between 2009 and 2014 were ivory, which is 40% of seized wildlife products, not of all items seized by customs. Given the priority and resources that the Border Force target on intercepting illegal ivory, I would expect that to form a significant proportion of their seizures, as the evidence shows.

Border Force has run specific operations targeting ivory in recent years and Operation Quiver, which specifically targeted illegal ivory in the parcel system, won the WWF enforcement operation of the year award last month. The expertise of our Border Force team is held in high regard globally and the UK has recently been asked to lead work at EU level on enforcement action against ivory trafficking. Interpol attended CITES for the first time. I have already met my hon. Friend the Security Minister and we intend to visit the wildlife crime unit early next year to reinforce our belief that this is an important matter that must be tackled.

Within the UK, enforcement is led by various police forces and supported by the national wildlife crime unit. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has provided additional resources in this spending review period to target illegal trade via the internet, which we know is an issue of growing concern. As I say, I intend to visit the unit early next year.

Globally, the UK is a strong supporter of enforcement efforts to combat poaching and trafficking, and we committed £4 million to the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime. The five partner organisations are at the forefront of supporting global enforcement efforts. Interpol is taking an increasingly active role in the cause, and we are partnering with it to focus on intercepting illegal shipments of ivory, rhino horn and other illegal wildlife products. Through those initiatives, we will have a real impact on the volume of trafficked ivory.

The driver for poaching is, of course, the lucrative profits that can be made in trafficking ivory. I learned on my trip to South Africa that somebody can earn in one night what they could earn in five years if they did a different job. It is important to bear that in mind when we think about the economic growth and development that we should be encouraging those countries to pursue. Where possible, we should use our aid to encourage alternatives, but not every country in Africa is eligible for overseas development aid.

Poaching is driven by the demand for ivory products. We must understand and address that problem. We need to raise Asian consumers’ awareness of the devastating impact they have on elephant populations. We need to inform and engage with them, and ultimately change their behaviour. His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge showed leadership when he visited Hanoi recently, alongside my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. That kind of engagement is a key part of what UK leadership can do.

To achieve that, we need to change the dynamics of the market. We need to reduce not just the availability of ivory, but the acceptability of the trade. That is why in the UK we are looking at our own market. Other countries, such as the US, have taken action. We want to see concerted international action. Most important, we want China to take action to follow through on its commitment to close its market.

Hon. Members referred to a number of other countries, so it is worth setting out what their plans involve. The US has introduced what it describes as a near-complete ban: a prohibition on trade in items under 100 years old. That is 30 years further back than the limit we have proposed, but it is a rolling date, so it will progressively allow trade in new items year by year. The US also included a range of exemptions from the ban, including musical instruments and items containing less than 200 grams of ivory if it is less than 50% of the overall item. Those are federal rules that apply to exports and trade between states. Trade within states is a matter for the individual states to legislate on. A small number of states, although some of them are highly populous, have adopted tighter controls along similar lines to the federal controls, but they remain the minority.

We welcome the Chinese Government’s announcement of their intention to close China’s domestic ivory market, and we look forward to hearing more detail about their intentions for the ban. Earlier this year, France announced that it will permit trade in pre-1975 ivory only on a case-by-case basis, although we and others are still seeking clarity on what the criteria for the case-by-case assessment are, so we can understand how restrictive its approach will be. We understand it intends to consult shortly to clarify the rules and exemptions.

I am proud that in September the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced plans for banning the sale of ivory that is less than 70 years old—dating from 1947. That is an important step. The 1947 date has its foundations in EU regulations, which still remain the overarching legislation for the implementation of CITES in the UK. From a control and enforcement perspective, there are advantages to working with a date that is already used by the rest of the EU and traders to draw a dividing line. We will consult early in the new year on our plans to implement such a ban. I am pleased that it has happened on the watch of this Prime Minister and the Secretary of State.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Pauline Latham: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Coffey: I want to cover as many of the points that were raised as I can. If I have time at the end, I will give way.

We will also consult on putting into legislation our existing administrative ban on exports of raw ivory. In June, the UK pushed the European Council to urge all member states to end the trade in raw ivory in its conclusions, although they are yet to be implemented by many member states. The Council conclusions also considered other measures to go further. I assure hon. Members that our plan means that the UK will have some of the strictest rules governing ivory trade in the world. It is part of our manifesto commitment to press for a total ban.

As has been said, over the centuries, ivory has been used in a wide variety of different products and artefacts. It is easy to think of ornaments and trinkets made...
solely of ivory but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Victoria Borwick) said, it is also used as part of decorative items and instruments, including piano keys, violin bows and sets of bagpipes. As a matter of good policy making, we need to understand better the impact that potentially banning the trade in all those different types of items will have, including on the businesses, museums and individuals who own such items. Therefore, as part of the consultation, we will have a call for evidence on those points.

John Mann: I hope the Minister is not turning into a liberal. There is a manifesto commitment and a consultation. Will the Minister recommend the Conservative party manifesto commitment in that consultation?

Dr Coffey: The Conservative party manifesto commitment—a commitment that I do not think Labour has ever included in its manifestos—is to press for a total ban on ivory sales, and that is part of the action that this policy fulfils.

The currently legal trade is only one part of the picture. We need a truly global response to all aspects of the problem if we are successfully to end the poaching crisis, and the UK leads the way in several of those areas. Just last week, I met CITES secretary-general John Scanlon, who commended the UK’s excellent work in leading the international illegal wildlife trade agenda and cited the 2014 London conference as a turning point for action. We provided financial and practical support to Vietnam to host the recent illegal wildlife trade conference in Hanoi, which built on the 2014 London conference and supported its successor in Botswana in 2016. To maintain global momentum, the UK will host the next high-level event in London in 2018.

Two years ago, we launched a £13 million fund to invest in projects around the world that tackle the illegal wildlife trade at its root. In Hanoi, the Secretary of State announced an additional £13 million to fund new measures, doubling our investment. We provide practical support on the ground. The British military trains anti-poaching rangers on the front line in Gabon, which is home to Africa’s largest population of forest elephants. That will be extended to provide training to anti-poaching rangers in other crucial countries such as Malawi. As I said, we continue to work with our partners using the UK Border Force, and the Crown Prosecution Service supports the judicial system in key states such as Kenya and Tanzania. We also support projects in Asia to raise awareness and educate potential consumers about the damage that is being done by demand for a whole range of wildlife products, including ivory.

On artworks, the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made some very strong points. She seemed to commit the Labour party to banning leather products, because she suggested that anything made from animals should be banned. We need to think carefully about how artworks in museums are considered. People may not realise that the Lewis chessmen are ivory, but we should consider whether museums should continue to display ivory tusks. That is the kind of thing that we should discourage them from doing.

I need to leave time for my hon. Friend for Stafford, so in conclusion, I can assure—

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way on the question that I asked her directly to answer?

Dr Coffey: Very briefly.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister explain why she will not extend the ban from 1947 to an earlier date?

Dr Coffey: I heard the hon. Lady’s question and I explained that, so she clearly was not listening.

To clarify, the manifesto commitment is that we will press for a total ban on ivory sales. That means acting on our domestic ivory trade and pressing for truly global and concerted action across all areas necessary to success. That means ensuring more effective enforcement, strengthening criminal justice, tackling the demand that is driving poaching, and supporting communities that are impacted by the effects of poaching. In all those areas, the Government are acting and showing true global leadership. I will ensure that, on my watch, we press on with such measures and continue to act so future generations can enjoy these majestic creatures roaming wild.
Westminster Hall

Monday 12 December 2016

[MRS MADELINE MOON in the Chair]

Retail Store Closure: Boxing Day

[Relevant documents: written evidence to the Petitions Committee, on the closure of retail stores on Boxing day, reported to the House on 6 December, and comments submitted to the Petitions Committee online forum on Boxing day shopping.]

4.30 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 168524 relating to the closure of retail stores on Boxing Day.

It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I confess that, being a bit long in the tooth, I can remember when Boxing day closure was the norm; it was a bank holiday, and nobody thought of doing anything other than closing. Certainly all big stores were closed, and people stayed at home with their family. In fact, I am old enough to remember when the new year sales actually began in the new year, after 1 January. People stayed at home, and if they wanted to go to the sales, they went later on—and here’s the thing: nobody starved to death. The world did not run out of cheap televisions. Nor did the country run out of supplies of winter coats and boots at reduced prices.

When I first realised that people were shopping on Boxing day, I would look at people going to the supermarket, and the queues, and would think, “For heaven’s sake, get a life.” However, I have moved from indifference to anger, because all the evidence shows that poorly paid retail workers are being exploited to fuel a national obsession—a debt-fuelled shopping binge that, in the end, does no one any real good. As my family will tell you, Mrs Moon, I can shop with the best of them, but if my shopping on Boxing day is done at the expense of some of the lowest paid workers in the community, something has to give way.

I should declare an interest, because I am a member of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, although it is quite a long time since I worked in a shop. When I did, I learned two important things. First, the job is physically exhausting, because workers are on their feet most of the day—and in my day, we worked only 9 till 5. Secondly, shop workers need inexhaustible reserves of patience and self-restraint to deal with the rude, demanding and frequently abusive customers that they have to put up with. Of course, that gets worse in the run-up to Christmas, which is why my union runs its “Keep your cool at Christmas” campaign before the Christmas rush, but for shop workers and those who work in warehouses and distribution—it is not only those on the shop floor who are affected—there is no respite.

The responses to our online consultation were interesting and overwhelming. We had nearly 6,000 responses. Many told us that they were not allowed to take holiday in December. One person working in distribution said that they could not take holiday in November or December. Indeed, in one case, people were not allowed to take holiday from October onwards. That means that people in the sector arrive at Christmas very tired. They now often work late on Christmas eve to prepare for Boxing day. In fact, we heard of one person working until midnight on Christmas eve. They arrive home to their families exhausted, long after the rest of us have begun our celebrations, and are then expected to be in work again on Boxing day.

As we know, Christmas day can be a very nice day, but it is not necessarily very relaxing. It is not relaxing for people with young children who are up as early as possible, or for people who have to cook the Christmas dinner, so many of us—including me—say that Boxing day is our day of rest. That choice is not available to many people in retail—if, indeed, they get Christmas day off. There are constant suggestions that some people are called in on Christmas day to keep preparing for the sales. The British Retail Consortium has said that large retailers are not allowed to open on Christmas day. We know that; it is a prime example of answering a question that was not asked. It also says that most preparation for Boxing day is done by Christmas eve, and that people working on Christmas day is not a problem. I am afraid that it is a problem; it keeps being reported as a problem, and I do not believe that the people who report it are lying to us.

If people get Christmas day off, they often find that they are unable to enjoy it fully, because they must be in work again on Boxing day; many people are expected to be in work by 7 o’clock. There is little public transport, so there are stories of people having to get up at 5 o’clock in the morning to get to work. The Minister shakes her head, but those testimonies were given to us online in our consultation.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a powerful speech that rings true in the light of the many testimonials that I have seen and heard. Christmas is special because people who might not normally be able to spend time with family can do so. Is it not another issue that many people who work in retail do not have the option of travelling to see their family, because now they must travel so early on Boxing day to make it back in time for the sales?

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is right. We have heard from people who work from 7 am to 6 pm on Boxing day. We heard from one lady who has to stay in work until 10 o’clock. People are at work not just when the shops are open; they do the restocking afterwards as well. So that lady has to get her partner to come and get her late at night, bringing with him their two small children—there is no one else to mind them—because she cannot afford taxis. Retail wages do not stretch to taxis at the best of times, and certainly not at Boxing day premium rates.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is indeed making a powerful speech. She has talked about families, and I know of families where both partners work in retail and have young children; they have extreme difficulty in getting childcare on Boxing day, because, obviously, childminders also want a break at that time.
Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is right. We heard from a number of people whose relatives have to look after their children on Boxing day because no childcare is available.

We heard from one lady who described her “nightmare” journey to work. She works in London, but there are no trains from where she lives on Boxing day. She has to get three different buses to work. It takes her a long time. However, she told us that some of her colleagues cannot get home to see their families outside London over Christmas, because they finish too late on Christmas eve and have to get back too early on Boxing day. She described herself as one of the lucky ones. Some luck, I would say.

For all that, many people in the sector now receive no extra pay. It is true, to be fair, that a few people in an online consultation with MoneySavingExpert.com said that they rely on their extra pay on Boxing day to pay for Christmas. I understand that. My answer would be that they should be paid a proper rate of pay throughout the year. Those people are unusual; most companies no longer pay premium rates. They have disappeared, just as the premium rates for Sundays did. The House may remember that we were promised, when Sunday trading was introduced, that people would not have to work on Sundays if they did not want to, and would be paid extra for doing so, but that arrangement disappeared as new people came in, and there were new contracts requiring them to work Sundays and holidays. If they did not sign up for that, they did not get the job. That is how it is for Boxing day as well. It is clear from talking to people in the sector that they can be required to work; an employer has a right to require people to work if it is in their contract, or if it is the usual practice in the industry—and working on Boxing day is increasingly becoming the usual practice. One person said to us, “I don’t get the choice of whether I want to work or not.”

We have been told over and over that people who are sick on Boxing day face disciplinary action, and that a refusal to work means instant dismissal. The worst case we heard of was of a woman who had her drink spiked on Christmas. She was ill and unable to work on Boxing day, and was therefore dismissed. The Government might want to reflect on how difficult it is for those who are off work.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I am hugely enjoying the hon. Lady’s speech; she is making a powerful case. Some 181 people in Kettering signed the petition. The Library briefing for the debate says: “Under the relevant legislation... workers do not have a statutory entitlement to time off on Bank Holidays”, which includes Boxing day. I am not saying whether that is right or wrong, but is it the hon. Lady’s wish that employees be statutorily entitled to have Boxing day off?

Helen Jones: I think the hon. Gentleman is right about the law as it stands; if he will forgive me, I will come to that in a moment.

Retailers say that Boxing day trading is important to them. The British Retail Consortium declined to give written evidence to my Committee before the debate, but in the past it has said that Boxing Day sales were up 0.7% on the year before. However, it is important to remember that those sales did not reach the December peak, which last year was on 23 December, or the November peak, which last year was on the day after that appalling American import, Black Friday.

The director of retail intelligence at Ipsos Retail Performance said: “Boxing Day has grown in significance as a shopping day over the last 5 years, as increasingly more retailers have started their Sales immediately after Christmas.”

I say two things to that: first, sales are on now, as anybody who has looked around knows; secondly, I have not seen any evidence that Boxing day opening generates more trade, rather than moving it about between days. If retailers were closed on Boxing day, there might well be more trade on 27 December—or, more likely, the Saturday following Christmas, when most people are off work.

However, we have had evidence that some stores may not even be that busy; I accept that some are, but some are certainly not. One store manager told us that his store was less busy than on a usual Sunday. Other people working in retail have told me that they are not busy, and that they do not accept returns on Boxing day because that would make the sales figures look worse. There are differences across the sector, and it seems that many shops open simply because others do; staff and store managers in my constituency say that that is often the case. As someone said in our consultation, retailers are great followers. Many in the sector would like Boxing day to be treated like Christmas day and Easter Sunday, when large stores cannot open. In fact, 92% of respondents to an USDAW consultation did not want to work on Boxing day, but 78% felt that they were pressured to.

The opening of the stores has a price for our communities, for families and for individuals; nothing in life is for free. If more shops open on Boxing day, there needs to be more of other services, such as waste collection; emergency services must be on duty; and there needs to be more of other services, such as waste collection.

Catherine McKinnell: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. I will put on the record another thing that, like childcare, is not generally available on Boxing day: the usual support for those whose family members require care. There is testimony from retail workers who are in the difficult position of both having to care for their family and being forced to go to work or ultimately risk not being able to bring the bread home.

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is right. That is an example of the pressures that those retail workers come under, many of whom are women and have caring or...
childcare responsibilities. I doubt that much would change if store openings began on 27 December. As one of the contributors to the consultation said about stores, “They will make their money back, but we will never get our time back.”

What is the purpose of all this? Does anyone actually gain? As another person said to us in the consultation, “I should like to think that the keen shoppers of the UK could wait one more day to grab a juicy bargain”—or, as staff call it, stock that has been gathering dust in the stockroom since 1993. Another person said, “Isn’t seven-day trading and numerous late nights enough?” I think it is.

Mr Hollobone: I am even more impressed by the hon. Lady’s speech as it goes on; she is making an extremely powerful case. However supportive I might be of her argument, one of the difficulties is that if people cannot physically go to a high street or out-of-town shop, they will shop online on Christmas day or Boxing day. That will ultimately take business away from the very shop workers whose livelihoods we are seeking to protect.

Helen Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a very reasonable point. My view is that, if people are going to shop online rather than go to the shops, they are going to do that anyway. For instance, it was put to me that many people receive vouchers for Christmas, particularly children, and that they enjoy spending them. Yes, they do, and I suspect they would enjoy spending them just as much on 27 December.

We need to find a balance. If my right to shop is being exercised at the expense of some of the poorest-paid people in our community, their time with their family should take precedence. It is a question of what kind of society we want. Do we want a society in which people are able to spend time with their family—their children or parents—or maybe even invite in an elderly neighbour who is on their own, or do we want a society that is a free-for-all, and in which the weakest go to the wall?

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Jones: No I will not, because the hon. Lady has just walked in; she was not here from the beginning of the debate.

Yvonne Fovargue: Does my hon. Friend agree that some of the responses to the consultations have been heartbreakingly ugly for the workers? For most of us, Christmas is about the memories that we have had over the years with our family and friends. I will read a response to the USDaw consultation from a man who says he has to work the nights between 23 and 24 December, 24 and 25 December, and 26 and 27 December. He has limited time with his wife and 10-month-old son, and is majorly fatigued due to the hours he spends working. He said:

“I am unable to enjoy our festive time together. I will never forget losing my son’s first Xmas.”

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is right. A lot of the testimony is heartbreakingly ugly. I come at this from this direction: if I deserve time with my family over Christmas, other people do, too.

Of course, there are exceptions. A number of workers in the emergency services—nurses, paramedics and police—have responded to our consultation, and they all accept that they may have to work on Boxing day because it is a matter of life and death. Shopping is not. Politicians are often quick to jump in if they think Christmas is being downgraded. People respond to spurious stories about Christmas being renamed; they say, quite rightly, that they do not want to see a Christian festival downgraded. Here is the news: it has been already. Contrary to what we might think, Christmas does not begin the day after bonfire night, or whenever the commercial frenzy sets off. It begins on the 25th. The 26th is the second day of Christmas—St. Stephen’s day. Boxing day is originally when servants were given their presents and time off. It is coming to something when in 21st-century Britain, we cannot give people the rights that indentured servants had hundreds of years ago. The situation could be vastly improved by a simple amendment to legislation to put Boxing day on the same footing as Christmas day and Easter Sunday, when large stores cannot open. We could do that.

The Prime Minister says that she wants a country that works for everyone. I have to say that it is not working for the retail trade at the moment. She also said quite recently:

“our Christian heritage is something we can all be proud of.”—[Official Report, 30 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 1515.]

I agree. That heritage has shaped our country and how it works. That is why I get Christmas cards from my Jewish colleagues, my Muslim colleagues and people of no faith at all. They recognise the importance of Christmas. If, as I have heard many people say, we want to preserve this country’s Christian heritage, we should preserve it and give people some time off at Christmas. Good King Wenceslas did not look out and see the queue for the next sale. As someone said in response to our consultation—forgive me for the language—“Christmas is about spending time with your family, not sodding shops!” I could not agree more.

It is about time we did something about this. In the end, a civilised society is judged by how it treats not the most powerful people in it, but those without power. Boxing day and bank holidays were introduced to ensure that workers got time off. We have moved away from that. We could at least move back a little bit by ensuring that large retail stores had to close on Boxing day.

Catherine McKinnell: I hesitate to interrupt my hon. Friend, because she is making a brilliant speech. Who has less power in this world than children? It means everything to them to spend Christmas with their family. One retail worker said in testimony:

“I’ve got a little girl and these early years are such a magical time for her. I feel that I miss out on her enthusiasm and wonder by having to work over Christmas.”

That says it all.

Helen Jones: It does. We hear much from the Government about supporting families and the family being very important. We show how important it is by our deeds, not just by words. It is time we gave these lowest paid workers the right that we all take for granted—the right to have a day off on Boxing day.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): May I ask Members who wish to speak to stand, as I have not received notifications from any speakers?
Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Thank you. Mr Philip Hollobone.

4.54 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Mrs Moon. In truth, I had not intended to speak, but I was so moved by the powerful speech made by the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) that I felt inclined to do so on behalf of my 181 constituents who signed the petition.

I find myself in the awkward position of seeing both sides of the argument. My instinctive sympathy is for retail workers who are forced to work on Boxing day, when they feel they should not have to do so. I feel for them, as I would anyone who was forced to work on Christmas day, which of course has statutory protection. My solution to this dilemma is for the Government to enact the relevant legislation, such that it would not be compulsory for retail workers to work on Boxing day if they did not wish to do so. I do not see why that would be difficult for the Government to do. There would be retail workers who were prepared to work on Boxing day if they had, to their mind, the requisite recompense to do so.

The reason I come to that compromise is that we now live, rightly or wrongly, in the age of the internet. Whether physical shops are open or closed on whatever day of the week, internet shopping will always be available. The bald, bold truth is that many retail workers will have signed this petition who will themselves go online on Boxing day to shop for items they want. While that is a digital choice, at the end of the day that digital request goes through to a warehouse—perhaps one of the warehouses in Kettering—where an employee is given an instruction to get that item from a shelf and put it on a pallet to go into a lorry for delivery to that consumer.

We are talking today—I recognise that it is with the best of intentions—about retail workers in physical shops on the high street or in our retail parks. However, they are in competition with real human beings who are employed in warehouses to respond to digital requests for consumer goods. Those digital requests are being posted online 24/7. People are shopping on the internet at times when you and I, Mrs Moon, may not think about shopping. Those retail requests go through to a warehouse—perhaps one of the warehouses in Kettering—where an employee is given an instruction to get that item from a shelf and put it on a pallet to go into a lorry for delivery to that consumer.

Mr Hollobone: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. Surely his argument is one for 24-hour shop opening. People can shop online at any time. Is there not some place where we just have to draw a line?

Mr Hollobone: I am very sympathetic to the hon. Lady’s cause. I voted against extending shop opening hours during the Olympics, and I voted against liberalising Sunday trading, but I recognise that I am probably on the wrong side of history in this debate because of the influence of internet shopping. I am trying to be honest with the hon. Lady. Lady and the Chamber. Ultimately, we are here to represent the citizens in our communities. Some of those citizens will work very hard in our local high street shops and some will work very hard in a local warehouse, especially in Kettering, just down road responding to digital requests. If I supported the thrust of the debate and said we should ban retail sales on Boxing day, I would be saying that that local high street employees were not allowed to work on Boxing day, but employees in the warehouse down the road could work and would be working harder, because they would be responding to online digital requests from our fellow citizens who decided to shop on Christmas day and Boxing day.

Do I think there should be 24/7 shopping? No, I do not. Do I think we should recognise what is left of our Christian heritage? Yes, I do. Do I think this request for a special exemption for Boxing day is religiously driven? No, I do not. I think that whatever Christian meaning there was in Boxing day has probably long departed us, unfortunately. Do I recognise there is still a religious and cultural significance to Christmas in our country? Absolutely. I do.

A fair compromise would be for the Government to say that no one should be required to work on Boxing day. That would give an element of statutory protection, recognising that Boxing day is the day after Christmas and has special meaning in our country. As the hon. Lady said, it goes back to giving servants boxes to thank them for their service over the previous year. We would then recognise the contribution that retail employees make and say to them that they do not have to work on Boxing day if they do not want to. There would be no downside for them—no loss of pay, pension or holiday entitlement—if they decided they did not want to work on Boxing day, but someone who wanted to would have every right to do so.

Helen Jones: I see where the hon. Gentleman is coming from, but does he not recognise that, even with the right he suggests, many low-paid workers in this sector are and would be pressured into giving up their Boxing day? There is little to prevent that because, with low-paid workers often in non-unionised workplaces, there is not an equal balance of power here.

Mr Hollobone: I am very sympathetic to the hon. Lady’s cause. I voted against extending shop opening hours during the Olympics, and I voted against liberalising Sunday trading, but I recognise that I am probably on the wrong side of history in this debate because of the influence of internet shopping. I am trying to be honest with the hon. Lady. Lady and the Chamber. Ultimately, we are here to represent the citizens in our communities. Some of those citizens will work very hard in our local high street shops and some will work very hard in a local warehouse, especially in Kettering, just down road responding to digital requests. If I supported the thrust of the debate and said we should ban retail sales on Boxing day, I would be saying that that local high street employees were not allowed to work on Boxing day, but employees in the warehouse down the road could work and would be working harder, because they would be responding to online digital requests from our fellow citizens who decided to shop on Christmas day and Boxing day.

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That is why I suggest what I hope is a reasonable compromise: employees should not be required to work on Boxing day and there would be no redress against them if they decided not to do so. I recognise absolutely what the hon. Lady is saying about hidden pressures, or sometimes overt pressures, on employees who do not wish to work on Boxing day, but I hope Her Majesty’s
Government could establish a system that was fair enough and understood by enough people for it to be accepted in this country that if people did not want to work on Boxing day, that would be fine.

That would probably mean that employees who wanted to work on Boxing day would have to be paid more. In many ways that is not a bad thing, but it would have to be accepted by employees who chose not to work on Boxing day that they would not be entitled to that double or triple pay. They would have to make a choice. If we are honest, many employees who do not want to work on Boxing day now might want to if they were offered double or triple time. I am not saying that is a satisfactory choice. I am just saying it is probably a realistic one that would result from such a system.

With that compromise, I think we would end up with a smaller number of people who were dissatisfied and a larger number who were happy to accept the end result. I cannot see any other way of solving the problem and cracking the nut. That is difficult because we now live in an online world. If we were having this debate 20 years ago, I would have agreed absolutely with the hon. Lady that retail shopping on Boxing day should be banned, but in 2016-17 it is almost impossible to do that because of the internet. I do not like it; I am not advocating it. I am just saying that is the way it is.

My solution and my humble petition to the Chamber in response to this excellent petition signed by so many people is that Her Majesty’s Government should make a sensible compromise and tell retail workers they do not have to work on Boxing day if they do not want to, but if they do, they have every right to do so.

5.5 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I apologise for not submitting my name to the list of speakers, Mrs Moon. Like the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), I felt compelled to speak because of the way the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) spoke and introduced the petition. Having listened to the hon. Gentleman, I do not believe I can sum up what he said more succinctly or eloquently, although I will try.

I agree with the overall outcome of the hon. Gentleman’s synopsis. I say that with great respect to the hon. Lady, who led on the petition. I agree with almost every word she spoke, save in two respects. I have no view either for or against Black Friday, which is not something that exercises me to any great degree. However, in politics, we want to achieve the art of the possible: the hon. Lady’s speech was strongly couched in terms of providing safeguards and protections for workers who need them most, and the solution suggested by the hon. Gentleman is, to my mind, the most pragmatically workable outcome.

I am not old enough, regrettably, to remember the new year sales when they were new year sales, but I remember that stores in Belfast such as Gilmore’s Electrical and Sam’s Yer Man on Holywood Road had people camping out on Boxing day for opening day on the 27th. They did so because the first television was half price and the second had 30% off, and so on. The person at the front of the queue got the best deal.

The thing about Boxing day opening was that folk were not preparing to purchase on Boxing day; they were leaving their homes and their Christmas meal to make sure they were at the front of the queue on Boxing day. We should forget about Christmastide and the religiosity we attach to Boxing day, or the feast of St Stephen, as people disrupted Christmas day to secure the best deal. For me, that quest for a saving was a tragedy for family and community life. Whatever motivates someone to secure that saving, whether it is because they really need it or cannot afford the normal cost, leaving what should be and remains a special day in this country—Christmas day—rupturing it and not spending time with family, friends and close loved ones simply for a retail experience is a great shame.

With that in mind, it would be useful if the Government considered how best to protect those who feel compelled to work, perhaps because they are on zero-hours contracts and feel that if they do not work on Boxing day they will be shut out of employment opportunities, and how best to send a message that if people worked on a Sunday or on what is considered and provided for legislatively as a special day, there would be an economic inducement and double or triple time would be available.

I remember the change in Northern Ireland when large stores opened from 1 to 6 on Sundays and staff who chose to work greatly appreciated the additional recompense. They factored it into their overall household income and knew they would be able to provide more for their family. That opportunity is not currently afforded to them on Boxing day. I would like choice to be injected into the retail sector, and if folk have to work there should be financial benefit for doing so.

Another restriction of the petition is that it focuses solely on retail. The hon. Member for Warrington North referred to emergency services, and I believe that there is a sub-category, not only through vocation but because of the risk of death and injury and the unbelievable work that those workers in the emergency services do.

Another key sector that we should consider is hospitality. Those in the sector will not just be thinking about going to work on Boxing day; they will be working on Christmas day, because many people set aside doing the nitty-gritty, hard work of cooking a Christmas meal themselves. They go to a hotel, their local pub or a bar and restaurant and they expect staff to be there to serve them on Christmas day. Many people in the hospitality sector work incredibly hard, but at this time of year, with Christmas parties happening right the way through December, they work even harder. As a group of staff, they will not get the chance to celebrate together until February or March; on Christmas day they will be expected to work. Whether people are generous with tips is one thing, but the issue for us is whether the Government are prepared to ensure that workers in that situation are given protection, and given choice and options. I think that that would be the greatest outcome of this petition debate. I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to provide, if not comfort today, then a pathway to how we, as representatives of our people, can ensure that those workers who request, need and deserve rights and protections are afforded that.

5.11 pm

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I apologise for coming in late, Mrs Moon; my meeting overran. I did want to be here at the beginning of the debate and I appreciate your giving me the chance to speak.
Retail is in my blood. I was in it for nearly 20 years. I started off at Greggs bakery at the age of 16, worked my way up, and worked for many major and small retailers, so I was one of the low-paid workers that hon. Members have been talking about, and I have to say that I disagree with what the petition is about. I have worked Boxing days and new year’s days. I have worked over the Easter period and on Good Friday. When you go into retail, that is expected. Times have changed. I agree with what some hon. Members have said: what about the other industries? I was also a performer and singer and used to work Christmas eves and Christmas days with my pianist, singing and entertaining people in restaurants. I did that because I wanted to make ends meet. To me, it was part of the lifestyle that I had chosen and it was my choice. When I worked on those Boxing days and new year’s days—

Catherine McKinnell: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Jenkyns: Sorry, not at the moment; I will come back to you. So many times when I was working on those Boxing days, new year’s days and so on, colleagues who had the day off would come in and see us because they were out shopping with their families. You are talking about giving people time off, but I saw that a lot of my colleagues were out shopping anyway. Times have changed.

The retail sector has Christmas day and Easter Sunday off, but it is not just about the Christian side of things. We live in a multicultural society, so this is not about any particular religion, really. I would like to put forward the other view, which is that of retailers. Retail is in my blood, as I said. High street retailers have found things so hard over the last decade, because of the internet. I have seen so many businesses close down. I used to work for Comet. It had been around for more than 100 years. Look at what happened to Comet; look at what happened to Woolworths. I also used to work for Allsports. All of those went bust after decades.

Boxing day was the busiest day of the whole year for us in retail. I remember that in one Comet store, we took more than £100,000 in one day. Normally, on the busiest Saturday, we would be lucky if we took £15,000, so to me, we are biting the hand that feeds us. Retail is struggling. The high street is dwindling; the internet is killing the high street. More and more people are shopping online, and that is just an inevitable aspect of the internet; I am not saying anything against it. However, if Boxing day is the busiest day of the year and we stop the ability to trade on that day, what will happen to the job security of these low-paid workers?

Helen Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Jenkyns: I will give way to you even though you did not to me.

Helen Jones: That is because the hon. Lady did not come in for the beginning of the speech. It is rude for someone to try to intervene when they were not here for the beginning of the speech. The hon. Lady is wrong: Boxing day is not the busiest day of the year overall. It may well have been where she worked, but it simply is not—

Andrea Jenkyns: In retail, it is.

Helen Jones: That is not the case. Figures from the Library show that, overall, Boxing day sales are not as high as those for the peak day in December or the peak day in November.

Andrea Jenkyns: With respect, in all the years that I worked in retail—you have not worked in retail like I have—it was the busiest day.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. I have worked in retail. I assume that you are referring to me.

Andrea Jenkyns: No, sorry, I was talking to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), but thank you, Mrs Moon.

My point is that we need to provide this opportunity. I know so many students who would welcome the opportunity to work on Boxing day and new year’s day to earn extra money and, as has been said, what about hospitality workers or those who work in the NHS? Are we just going to ban anyone from working so that life completely stops on Boxing day? That is not realistic. To those who say that we should stop people working on Boxing day, I say that I do not want any more retailers to go out of business. I worked in retail for more than 20 years, and a large number of the workers whom I worked with in my 20-year career were happy to work on Boxing day. Not everyone is signing this petition, and look at how many people work in the retail industry.

5.16 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the petitioners and the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on initiating the debate. It is a pleasure to be in the company of so many former retailers—and I was a retailer, too. I was thinking that my time in retail was such a long time ago until I started listening to the hon. Lady; all the memories came flooding back of those times and of the stresses at peak season, as we called it.

I should point out that I have been in not only physical, bricks-and-mortar retail, but internet retail. I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: I have a shareholding in teclan ltd.

Being in retail is incredibly tough. If my memories are as fresh as the experiences that we have heard about today, it is an extraordinarily demanding job, not just at Christmas, but all year round. I know that from people who are still experiencing the kinds of pressures that I did when I was in retail. I started off on the shop floor, part time, and worked my way up through the trainee management programme. The worst kind of job must be doing trainee management in retail, because people really have to do quite a lot as part of that.

We have heard stories about people being pressured to work all the time—not just at those times when people should be able to have time off legitimately, but throughout the working day. I am talking about people having meal breaks standing up because they do not
have time to sit down to enjoy their breaks. There is also pressure in terms of pay versus hours. In many cases, the rates of pay are quite low, which is challenging. Where they are better, that is often negated by the fact that the hours that people are working for those fixed rates are longer than they would be required to work normally. Retail staff have to put up with a lot.

We are talking now about people working on Boxing day and Christmas eve. Often, when the shop is closing on Christmas eve, it is a hive of activity, getting things ready for Boxing day, and people work late into the night. From personal experience, I know that that could go on until the morning of Christmas day in some cases. I very much hope that that has changed for most people, but I know that it did happen in those days and I am concerned that there are still those pressures out there today.

The hon. Member for Warrington North gave some clear examples of gross unfairness in the system and the pressures that people are put under, and particularly cases where people feel that their job is at risk because they have not complied with retailers’ requests to work. That is clearly unacceptable and should be considered unacceptable by everybody. The hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) was keen, and absolutely correct, to demonstrate that he has great empathy and sympathy with the people working under those conditions. He was also keen to show both sides; he brought in the issue of internet shopping and the pressures on the retailers and businesses to cope with that. He mentioned there being something of a conundrum with that issue.

Has the boat been missed? I contend that it has not, and that there is still a lot that can be done. I hope that we will hear more from the UK Government. I want to talk a bit about what is happening in Scotland, in order to challenge some perceptions about that. While I am talking about Scotland, may I pass on the apologies of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who was keen to take part in this debate but was unfortunately the victim of delayed travel arrangements? He apologises for not being here to those people who expected him to be.

The hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) perhaps missed the point about people going shopping if they are not working. It is about choice. It is about what someone chooses to do with their family on the day; it is up to them whether they decide to go shopping to spend time with their family, or to stay home. She talked about her experience with Woolworths, Comet and Allsports; I bet that many retailers are glad that she did not work for them, given that they all went bust.

Andrea Jenkyns: I actually did not work for Woolworths, just for the record. I was just saying how they—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady needs to be called before making an intervention.

Drew Hendry: Thank you, Mrs Moon, I will bear that in mind. May I say, for the record, that I did not intend to cast any aspersions? That was merely a bit of humour that I hoped to bring in. One thing that I do agree with the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood about is that Boxing day is part of the key trading season. I remember being involved in retail and know, from speaking to retailers, that it has not changed, and is still an important part of the mix. Although it may not be the most important day of the year, it is still part of the important season for them.

The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) brought up the spectre of Black Friday. I am so delighted that I never had to endure Black Friday. It looks like an absolute nightmare. He was right to talk about the quest for savings, because that brings us back to an earlier point: people have this desperation to go out and make a saving at that time of year, because they have been conditioned to do so by the sales process over many years. He was also correct to bring up the hospitality sector, in which a great many people have to work over the festive season, and they face quite challenging circumstances. Even though their arrangements can be changed, we should still think of them at this time of year.

I said that I want to talk about what is happening in Scotland. We should take into account that there is an opportunity here to look at different behaviours; the boat has not been missed if we can encourage retailers to act in a different way. It is not easy to ask them to change the drive for sales; I understand that, and as I said, I have been in that market. However, when organising Christmas rotas, employers should take account of the needs of employees with caring responsibilities—that should be a fundamental part of the job that they do—and of those with family far away, as well as other relevant personal circumstances, where possible, to ensure compassionate working practices.

If an entitlement to leave on Boxing day is agreed between an employer and an employee in a contract, that contract must be upheld. Employer flexibility should be part of ensuring that workers achieve the right work-life balance, which in the long run benefits the employer, the employee and the economy as a whole. Compassionate and fair employment practices, in which employers take reasonable steps to support the wellbeing of their employees, should be part of the foundation of any sustainable and inclusive economy. When employers are engaging on holiday rotas, especially over the Christmas period, all those personal requirements should be taken into account, and it should not cause someone disproportionate detriment to work on Boxing day.

The Scottish Government will shortly take forward a commission on a flexible job index for Scotland, to determine the availability of genuinely flexible jobs that meet the needs of people who want to work flexibly. The index will analyse the ratio of jobs advertised as being open to flexibility, breaking that down by city and region, by role type, by sector and by salary band. It will also seek to identify the demand for flexibility in Scotland and the proportion of people who need that flexibility. The index will be used as a key step to promoting flexi-recruitment and other working practices in the private sector. In 2017, the Scottish Government will pilot mentoring on flexi-recruitment issues for small and medium sized businesses, building on existing support services.
Employer investment in the wellbeing of the workforce will improve economic outcomes. This is proved time and again: when businesses look after the welfare of the employees who work for them, they become more productive, do better and often make more profit. We share the idea of the fair work convention that by 2025 people in Scotland will have a world-leading work life, with fair work driving success, wellbeing and prosperity for individuals, businesses, organisations and society. This vision challenges not only business but employers, unions and the third sector, and there are clear actions for Government. In Scotland, we fully endorse the convention’s framework and will work with it to embed its principles in workplaces across Scotland. We will continue to raise awareness among employers in the public, private and third sectors of the benefits of fair work, to promote the fair work framework and to champion fairer, better workplaces.

Mr Hollobone: I have listened to the hon. Gentleman’s speech with great interest. Things are always slightly different in Scotland—often for good reasons, but sometimes for not so good reasons. My understanding is that the Christmas Day (Trading) Act 2004 prohibits large shops from opening on Christmas day. The petitioners say:

“If only everywhere could be closed boxing day!”

I think they would like to see a Boxing day trading Act prohibiting large shops from opening on Boxing day. Would the Scottish Government support that?

Drew Hendry: The petitioners are quite right to look to protect the rights of workers. We heard compelling words from the hon. Member for Warrington North about the pressures that the petitioners feel need to be addressed. I am of the opinion that holidays should be respected; for example, in Scotland, traditionally, on new year’s day, shops are closed. I am unsure how we could make that work across the business sector, for small businesses and large retailers, through legislation. I have described the moves by the Scottish Government to improve the working lives of workers across Scotland through a different approach to working with businesses and organisations. In Scotland, the proper living wage, which is higher than the living wage that the UK Government have stipulated, has been adopted by a great many businesses. Encouraging good behaviour by businesses, including retailers, can and does work when we can get the message of positive change across.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I am interested in the hon. Gentleman’s answer to the question asked by the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone). Am I right in thinking the Scottish Government do not favour stopping large stores from opening on Boxing day?

Drew Hendry: I have clearly given my own view: I see this as challenging. I do not think there has been a proposition from the Scottish Government on this issue, and I would not presume to speak for them, so I gave my own answer to the question. The way forward needs to be innovative and to include a different approach from the Government. We should adopt a model whereby retailers in particular—but other businesses as well—are encouraged to act. I gave the example of the living wage being adopted at a much higher level in Scotland. The Scottish business pledge has been signed up to, and employers have been encouraged to provide much better working conditions for their employees. There is measurable evidence that when businesses adopt those practices—when they are more considerate towards their employees and introduce measures to improve the situation for employees—they see increased productivity, increased profit and better sustainability. Staff are more likely to be retained and to stick with those jobs, and to be able to achieve a more effective work-life balance. We are discussing Boxing day, but the core of the issue is surely not just one day in the year, no matter how important that day is, or how stressful people might find it to miss out on it. This must be about making working conditions better for people across the entire year, so that they can all benefit from a better work-life balance from the beginning of January through to the end of December.

5.32 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on making a comprehensive, passionate plea to support working people in the retail sector. That was supported by nearly everybody who spoke, and the contributions made by hon. Members around the Chamber were entirely consistent with what she said. The hon. Members for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) were entirely sympathetic, as were my hon. Friends the Members for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) in their interventions. The one discordant note came from the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns), who frankly gave a description of retail that many workers in the retail sector would not recognise.

On Christmas day, my children will wake my wife and me early—we are still in that stage of family life. We will go and visit other family members, and we are lucky to be able to do so, but such a happy family scenario is not available to everybody in this country. As other hon. Members have mentioned, many workers in sectors beyond retail have to work over the festive period, for very good reasons. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North said that shopping is not a matter of life and death, but for key workers in the NHS, the care sector and in our police and fire services, working is a matter of protecting life and sometimes dealing with death. Sadly, that includes on Christmas day and Boxing day. We can take this opportunity to thank everybody who works in the emergency services and the care sector for the contribution that they make every day of the year, and especially at the festive time, when most of us are able to take time to be with family and friends.

Many people have to work in the hospitality sector over Christmas, as has been mentioned, and it is right to recognise the realities for such people. There are also some in retail, in small shops, who work on Christmas day and sometimes Boxing day—typically shop owners. The Association of Convenience Stores has said that smaller shops tend not to want what it describes as “paid staff” working—staff who are not owners or family members—because of the costs. However, it
recognises as part of that equation the desirability of paid staff—again, the ACS’s term, not time—being able to have time off to spend with their families.

That leaves us with the large stores. The successful USDAW campaign saw the private Member’s Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) become law in the Christmas Day (Trading) Act 2004. At the time, the internet was not as advanced as it is now—I will come to some points made about online trading later. What happens to staff on Boxing day is increasingly a concern, and it has led to this petition, which has been signed by a very large number of people. The petition was the result of an increasing number of large retailers opening on Boxing day—and opening earlier and for longer.

As we have heard—I have heard this from constituents of mine—people are finishing later and later on Christmas eve. They still have to prepare for Boxing day, sometimes on Christmas eve, and sometimes on Christmas day itself. I heard a story about a major high street retail name that opens at 5 am on Boxing day, and staff have to be there at 3 am or 3.30 am. They have to travel—what time do they get up? Are some of them even starting on Christmas day? What kind of a Christmas is it for someone who knows they have to be at work at 3 am or 3.30 am on Boxing day? I cannot even begin to think what that must be like. However, that is where some large retailers are headed—that is the reality—and why there has been this petition. When we look at the consequences for family life, I think we can all understand and share people’s concerns—as everybody in the Chamber did, with one sad exception so far, although we have yet to hear from the Minister.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North, I am a very proud member of USDAW. Its survey said that 16% of workers say that they face working longer hours this year, 7% say the hours will be shorter and 77% say the number of hours will be much the same. The number of hours that staff are being asked to work is therefore increasing. We have heard about the impact of long hours in the run-up to Christmas and about the inability of most staff to take time off for a considerable time—time off that would enable them to recuperate—and about the impact on families, especially those with children. Parents who finish late on Christmas eve then have to come back and put the stockings together.

Helen Jones: Put the toys together.

Bill Esterson: Yes, and the toys—I thank my hon. Friend. They also have to prepare the food for Christmas day with very little time to enjoy themselves.

Mr Hollobone: I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s speech hugely. We are all sympathetic to the plight of retail workers at Christmas time. I am not a member of USDAW, but my grandparents were small shopkeepers. To my mind—and in answer the petitioners who have gone to such efforts to draw this plight to our attention—the point is that the Christmas Day (Trading) Act 2004 prohibits large shops from opening on Christmas day. Are Her Majesty’s Opposition in favour of a Boxing day trading Act, which would prohibit large shops from opening on Boxing day?

Bill Esterson: I had not realised just how much I had in common with the hon. Gentleman. Like him, I had grandparents who ran a corner shop—I am assuming his grandparents ran a corner shop?

Mr Hollobone indicated assent.

Bill Esterson: The hon. Gentleman is nodding; so we both had grandparents who ran corner shops.

Mr Andrew Smith: You’re not cousins, are you?

Bill Esterson: I am struggling to make progress, Mrs Moon, because I am being given all sorts of interesting suggestions.

My grandad told me that if people cannot afford to pay decent wages, they should not open a shop. That is a good piece of advice about being a responsible employer. He might have amended that, in the context of this debate, to say that if employers cannot give decent time off over Christmas, they should not be opening a shop, especially on Christmas day and Boxing day. The hon. Member for Kettering is suggesting one option. Only 1.5% of the thousands of staff surveyed by USDAW said they wanted to work on Boxing day, so something needs to be done and it needs to be addressed. One option, undoubtedly, would be to amend the Christmas Day (Trading) Act 2004; another would be to have a Boxing day trading Act. I wait to see what the Minister has to say on that score. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that if nothing is done through that piece of legislation, there should be action to ensure—this goes back to his earlier comments—that staff who do not want to work on Boxing day will not be under pressure to do so.

The hon. Gentleman reminded us that he voted against the Government’s attempt to include relaxation of Sunday trading in the Enterprise Bill in Committee and on Report. He will remember from that debate that points were put forward very forcefully and that extremely strong evidence was presented to us that many staff are simply unable to take time off on Sundays because of concerns and pressure, and the same applies to Boxing day, even though the legislation is different unless Boxing day is on a Sunday. We have to find some way of addressing the issue. I do not think the answer is necessarily for the Opposition to be prescriptive, but we need to get to a point where no one has to work in a large store on Boxing day unless they want to. Like the rest of us, they want to enjoy Christmas. They want to travel, see family and enjoy Christmas eve, not to feel under pressure to work on Boxing day.

USDAW’s view is that the only staff who should be available to those large retailers at that time are volunteers. I suppose the point it is making is that if a store could manage purely with volunteers, there would be no objection in principle to that store opening. However, if stores are relying on only the 1.5% of staff who are prepared to work and the 5.5% of staff—I think that was the figure—who are non-committal, most stores would struggle to open without forcing staff to work.

Let me turn to the points about online trading. Things have changed since 2004. The nature and scale of online trading is very different. A number of hon. Members have made points about the impact of online trading on high street and, indeed, out-of-town stores.
[Bill Esterson]

Perhaps the time has come to look at the needs of staff working in the warehouses such as those that the hon. Member for Kettering described in his constituency. Perhaps it is time to look at what the Government’s responsibility is towards staff who work in warehouses or for internet retailers, and the way in which they are treated. Those staff have a right to a Christmas day and at the moment they are not covered by the Christmas Day (Trading) Act, let alone by what we are talking about for Boxing day. The time has come to consider how that might be addressed and how we might get the kind of fairness that we would all expect for our own families.

Points have been made about the level of trading over Christmas. One estimate is that more than £77 billion will be spent in the Christmas period in the retail sector. Most of the people who work in retail, of course, are very low paid. As we have heard, premium pay is now a thing of the past in most businesses. In that context, is it too much to ask of the major retailers to do more to support their staff by not trading on Boxing day? Remember that those major retailers all have their own internet retail presences, so it is not as if they cannot trade online. By the way, plenty of people go online on Christmas day. It is not just Boxing day, is it?

Some online retailers do not necessarily fulfil orders. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) made the point from his own experience in the internet retail sector—he may want to intervene to set me straight on this—that there are plenty of opportunities to delay fulfilment of orders. There are plenty of retailers that do just that, so they are not open 24/7.

Drew Hendry: I am grateful for the opportunity to underline that point. There is room for retailers to be innovative by using the new technology—what would in other circumstances be the challenge of internet retailing—to help to create a much more equitable situation with in-store retail. The big benefit of having in-store staff is that they can give advice. Boxing day is a day when people are picking up units. They do not need advice; it is just about picking up the goods at a discount.

Bill Esterson: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention because it really adds to everybody’s understanding of the challenges, opportunities and some of the realities. Perhaps the Minister can take some of these points away and, as well as responding to them, look at how online and offline retail operate and at what might be appropriate in supporting staff in both parts of the industry.

I want to talk a bit about some of the retailers who have so far resisted the pressure to open on Boxing day, because not every major retailer does. The initial consultation for the Christmas Day (Trading) Act, which was carried out in 2002, suggested that competitive pressure was one reason the Act was needed. Although at the time not every retailer by any means was opening on Christmas day—indeed, it was only a few—the sense was that in the end everybody would have to do so to keep up or they would lose ground.

A similar pressure now applies with Boxing day. So far, retailers including Lidl, Aldi and John Lewis have resisted the pressure, and have done so successfully, which suggests a public appetite for delaying shopping to a degree. In the last year, those retailers have seen their trading figures go up at the expense of some of their competitors, but we do not know how long that will continue. Earlier evidence suggests a concern across the sector that businesses will ultimately all have to work and trade on Boxing day unless there is Government intervention—nobody else can make such an intervention.

The Conservatives say that this is nothing to do with them—that it is a free market and that it is up to businesses to decide what to do. The problem, if we follow that argument, is who will prevent abuse. The problems with Sunday trading, and now with Boxing day, mean that workers are unable to take time off. Who will intervene to look after workers and ensure fairness between employers on the one hand and staff members on the other?

We have seen far too many abuses recently. We have seen the behaviour of Sports Direct, and some of Amazon’s behaviour in Scotland was highlighted over the weekend. A number of us will have constituents who have been affected by the cuts in pay and conditions at Marks and Spencer. It is all our responsibility, and particularly the Government’s responsibility, to intervene on the side of working people, whether on fair pay or hours of work.

Who looks after responsible businesses? The businesses I mentioned, Lidl, Aldi and John Lewis—and there are many more like them—want to do the right thing and act responsibly. How will they be encouraged and supported unless the Government introduce the necessary conditions so that they can do that without succumbing to competitive pressures? As we discussed when we were considering a statutory instrument last week, the Prime Minister is consulting on boards having a representative with responsibility for staff. It is regrettable that the Government appear to be walking away from having elected worker representation on boards, but will such board representatives be strong enough? Will they have the interest to ensure that staff are treated fairly? The concern is that the measure just will not go far enough. This is an example of where Government intervention cannot just be left to the market. It cannot just be voluntary.

Perhaps the time has come to consider a cautionary tale. We can either go down the route of supporting responsible businesses and treating workers fairly, or we can consider what has happened historically. I have mentioned some of the more recent cases, but we saw all sorts of horrors before there was Government support. I am not suggesting that the Minister is in any way interested in repeating what happened hundreds of years ago, but my mind goes back to “A Christmas Carol”. I wonder who Ebenezer Scrooge might be in this scenario. Surely not the Prime Minister.

Where is the line if the Government say they will not intervene? We used to send children up chimneys in Victorian Britain, and I know the Minister is not suggesting that, but let us remember the ghost of Christmas past and make sure that the ghosts of Christmas present and Christmas future show fair treatment for workers and responsible businesses. That is the way forward, and the right solution will ensure that workers are looked after on Boxing day, that family life is protected, that responsible businesses are encouraged and that there is the right balance between online, high street and out-of-town shopping. I challenge the Minister to deliver on that.
5.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on introducing the debate on the closure of retail stores on Boxing day. I must be of a similar vintage, because I can recall when there was no shopping whatever on Boxing day. I have great sympathy with some of her comments on the many changes that our society has undergone since those days.

Even in those days, however, people still worked on Boxing day. People in retail might not have worked, but I remember going to my first football match, Chelsea versus Ipswich, on Boxing day. That match employed a lot of people, as do horse racing and many other sporting events that used to take place on Boxing day, and still do.

Also like the hon. Lady, I can attest to the exhausting nature of work in the retail sector. I would hardly call my time in retail a career, but I worked in a shop for about six months—obviously a great deal less than my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns), who colourfully described her extensive career and experience in the retail sector. Retail is an exhausting occupation on any day of the year. I completely agree that it is particularly exhausting in the run-up to Christmas, and I have great sympathy with workers who, as the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) said, work until late on Christmas eve and have to be back at work on Boxing day, sometimes as early as 3 o’clock in the morning. When he asks what sort of Christmas that is, I agree with his sentiment.

Christmas is a time for family, which is why one of my constituents, community worker Julie Lees, signed this petition. She is fed up of losing some younger adults in her family to the world of work on Boxing day. There is no doubt that there is considerable feeling about the issue, as expressed in the debate. That feeling prompted the e-petition, which has now reached more than 140,000 signatures. I understand those who feel it unnecessary for shops to be open so soon after Christmas. Many points have been made about other sectors that are busy working straight after Christmas and about online trade, which I will address in a little more depth.

For a number of reasons, the Government do not support an outright ban on shops opening on Boxing day. Boxing day is a bank holiday, and the Banking and Financial Dealings Act 1971 specifies which days are to be bank holidays and contains provisions for appointing additional or substitute days. Additional bank holidays, including those created after 1971, are appointed by royal proclamation in early summer each year for the coming year. Bank holidays are so called because the Act makes provision for banks to close for business by deferring the placement of bills of exchange until the next appropriate day. However, there are no other statutory restrictions on trading associated with bank holidays; in fact, we have few legislative constraints on trading hours at all. There are no constraints on online retail trading, and few constraints apply to small shops.

Mr Hollobone: The Minister’s remarks are of great interest. I think that the general public do not fully appreciate that point; I certainly did not. A bank holiday is not a public holiday. Lots of employees have bank holidays off not because the Government say they should but because their contract of employment says that they should. She would serve the public well if she put what she just said into plainer English, so that everyone could understand it.

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for doing what he asked me to do by making that point simply. It would be good if more people were aware of it.

The Sunday Trading Act 1994 restricts the opening of large shops to a maximum of six consecutive hours between 10 and 6 on a Sunday. The Act also recognises the religious significance to Christians of Easter Sunday by obliging large retailers to close. By comparison, Boxing day has little if any religious significance. Neither the Christmas Day (Trading) Act 2004 nor the Sunday Trading Act contains provisions for varying their terms, so any additional constraints on retailers would require new primary legislation.

Although the House has considered changes to the Sunday Trading Act numerous times since 1994, it has always considered that the Act strikes a good balance between the rights of workers and those of retailers and consumers. My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) mentioned that he voted against the watering down of the Act; he will be pleased to hear that the Government have no plans to make changes to it in the coming years.

On statutory leave entitlement, although there is no statutory entitlement to time off on Boxing day, almost all retail workers, like those in other sectors, are entitled to a generous statutory paid leave entitlement of 5.6 weeks per year, which equates to 28 days a year for someone working five days a week. That is more than the 20 paid days of annual holiday a year mandated under EU law and ensures that workers in the UK get at least four weeks’ paid leave on top of bank holidays, assuming that they have leave on those bank holidays.

An employer has the right, whether or not it is explicitly reflected in the employment contract, to require a worker to work on a public holiday. It is common in industries such as retail or emergency services. We have also heard from hon. Members about other sectors such as hospitality, sport and leisure. Employers can determine when workers take their leave—for example, to cover an annual shutdown at work—and can refuse to give leave at a certain time, but they must give workers the opportunity to take their leave at some point during the leave year. The entitlement should give all workers sufficient time to see their families over the year, although I accept that Christmas and various other times of the year are absolutely associated with spending time with family.

In addition, there are special provisions for shop workers who do not wish to work on Sundays, at least. All shop and betting shop workers can opt out of Sunday working, unless Sunday is the only day they have been employed to work. A shop worker can opt out of Sunday working, even if they agreed in their contract to work on Sundays, by giving three months’ notice.

In putting the legal case before hon. Members, I am sympathetic to the fact that, in practice, many workers, fearing for their jobs, might find it more challenging to give effect to their legal rights than I find it to read...
them out. I regret that, but staff who opt out of Sunday working are protected from being treated unfairly. If an employer needs shop workers to work on Sundays, they must tell the employees in writing that they can opt out within two months of starting work.

In terms of the potential impact on retailers, the Government recognise the huge importance of the retail sector to both national and local economies, and the pressures under which it labours. The sector generated £91.7 billion in gross value added in 2015, and accounts for 5.6% of the UK economy and more than 3 million jobs. Boxing day sales are extremely popular; we have debated whether it is the busiest day of the year. House of Commons Library figures indicate that although it is not the busiest day, it is certainly very busy with consumers. Last year, an estimated £3.7 billion was spent with retailers, around 22% of it online. If we were to ban high street outlets from opening on Boxing day, that would result in a significant loss of business for them to online retailers, which would particularly disadvantage retailers without a strong online presence. We must bear that in mind, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering and a number of other hon. Members pointed out.

Mr Hollobone: The Minister is making an interesting speech. She has basically said that she is not in favour of a Boxing day trading Act to ban retail shops from opening on Boxing day, but she has also said that the Government have existing provisions to allow retail employees to opt out of working on a Sunday. There are 52 Sundays in a year. Why would the Government object to allowing retail employees to opt out of working on Boxing day, which is just one day a year?

Margot James: It would be interesting to look at the picture when Boxing day falls on a Sunday. Presumably that would give people greater rights, at least on those rare occasions. Any changes to the legislation that I have mentioned would require primary legislation. I would hope that there were other ways to afford shop workers some protection without recourse to primary legislation. The law is a balance that Parliament has accepted, and the Government are reluctant to disturb that balance. To change the law would risk opening new disagreements; new primary legislation would create new demands and new risks.

Bill Esterson: The Minister is making some reasonable points, but she said that she hoped that there was some recourse for the Government other than primary legislation. I thought that she was going to tell us what it was, but she seems to have moved on to another point. If I can bring her back, what does she see as the recourse, other than primary legislation, to ensure that staff who want time off get it?

Margot James: I have no suggestions at the moment to put to the hon. Gentleman, and I would not like to give the impression that the Government are exploring that. We are opposed to a ban on retail trading on Sundays. More generally, Boxing day is a day on which some people like to get out of the house. It has long been a major day for shopping and other events, and I have covered the point that an increasing number of workers in other sectors are busy at work.

Another argument against banning offline retail—that is what it is now—from opening on Boxing day is that many other workers would want to know why we were making an exception for the offline retail trade when employees in other sectors work on Boxing day. There are many aspects to the issue other than the threat posed to retailers by an outright ban, particularly, as I have mentioned, to retailers without a strong online presence.

May I respond to a few of the points made by the hon. Member for Warrington North in her interesting and well researched speech? Workers have many protections under the working time regulations, including entitlements to rest breaks, daily and weekly rest periods, and a maximum working week of 48 hours, normally averaged over 17 weeks. However, workers can choose to opt out of the 48-hour limit, and I accept that some jobs are more or less conditional on their exercising that opt-out. The qualifying period for unfair dismissal, which the hon. Lady also mentioned, is intended to strike the right balance between fairness for employees and flexibility for employers.

Helen Jones: The Minister mentioned the working time directive, but the problem in retail is that many workers work flexible hours, so it is difficult for them to enforce that provision.

Also, the Government often miss the point about unfair dismissal and the balance between employers and employees. The law does not say that employers cannot dismiss people; it says that they cannot dismiss them unfairly. That is the key point. Because the time has been extended, those who are forced to work on bank holidays find it difficult to enforce their rights without being dismissed, so they simply cannot make a claim.

Margot James: I take the hon. Lady’s point. It is true that employers can dismiss people, as long as they are not unfair about it and they go through proper consultation and so forth. The flexibility cuts both ways. People increasingly want to work flexibly, especially if they have caring responsibilities and suchlike; likewise, employers, certainly in the fast-changing world of retail, require some groups of workers to work flexibly.

I will finish by reaffirming that we do not believe that it is for the Government to tell businesses how to run their shops or how best to serve their customers. Notwithstanding the many very good arguments that I have heard this afternoon in favour of giving employees greater freedoms on bank holiday periods, particularly around the family-associated festive season, we believe that the current legislation provides the right balance between the interests of employers and workers, and at least provides workers with a generous leave entitlement. The Government therefore do not propose to ban shops from opening on Boxing day.

6.12 pm

Helen Jones: I shall be brief. This has been a very interesting debate, with thoughtful contributions from the hon. Members for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). The last named, whose constituency is in a beautiful part of the world but has a very long name, has at least tried to
propose some ways to solve this dilemma, but I must pick up on something he said. No doubt he was a compassionate manager, but we do not legislate for the good; we legislate for the worst.

As the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) both acknowledged, there is a problem with workers being forced to work on Boxing day when they do not want to. The Government really have to take on board the opinions of most Members who contributed today and look seriously at the issue, because it is the Government’s responsibility to regulate. I know many members of the Government do not like doing that, but if they did not we would still be sending children up chimneys and people would still be working long days in factories, as my hon. Friend said.

We need to find a way out of this dilemma. It is clear from the debate that the current situation is not fair to workers in retail or to their families. It is not even terribly fair to employers, because workers who are treated well are more productive. There is an issue with people working in warehouses, as the hon. Member for Kettering said, but there are ways to deal with that and with internet shopping without doing so on the backs of retail workers. Of course some people have always worked on bank holidays—hospitality workers have to do so, and so do people who work at sporting fixtures—but those in retail are in a particularly difficult position: having had an exhausting time in the run-up to Christmas, they then do not get a proper Christmas break.

I hope that the Minister will go back to the Department, think very seriously and discuss with her colleagues what can be done to resolve the situation. It is clear that at the moment it is really unfair on those in retail.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 168524 relating to the closure of retail stores on Boxing Day.

6.15 pm

Sitting adjourned.
I have been very moved by Carly, Samantha and Rob’s determination for something positive to come out of these diagnoses. I think their fundraising and campaigning for the Cystic Fibrosis Trust is nothing short of inspirational.

Personalised medicines can transform life for people with cystic fibrosis and a range of diseases, including muscular dystrophy and Alzheimer’s, but without a process for appraising these medicines that is fit for purpose, patients are unable to access these innovative medicines. That is why we called for today’s debate.

Cystic fibrosis is a life-shortening inherited disease that affects more than 10,000 people in the UK. It causes the lungs and digestive system to become clogged with mucus, making it hard to breathe and digest food. The damage that cystic fibrosis causes to the lungs means that many people eventually need a lung transplant. There is no cure for cystic fibrosis but many treatments are available to manage it, including physiotherapy, exercise and nutrition. The median survival age is just 28. What people like Carly, Sam and countless other families across the country need to hear today is the hope that a way forward can be found that will bring an end to an agonising and unnecessary wait that has gone on for well over a year now.

Orkambi was licensed in November 2015. It is a first-of-a-kind personalised medicine that treats the cause, not just the symptoms, of those with a particular mutation of the genetic defect that causes cystic fibrosis. Around half of the people with cystic fibrosis in England stand to benefit. Personalised medicines offer a revolution in cystic fibrosis care. People in countries such as France, Germany and America who have been on the drug for some time are beginning to report total transformations in their health, with some improving enough to come off the lung transplant waiting list—on which one in three people with cystic fibrosis die. Clinicians in England are desperate to prescribe Orkambi. Those who are prescribing it, on compassionate grounds, report that the drug, which halves hospital admissions—that lasts for months—for people with cystic fibrosis, could help ease the severe and worsening shortage of beds on cystic fibrosis wards.

I stood in this Chamber a year ago to raise concerns that the appraisal process for Orkambi was not suited to an innovation of this kind. The existing National Institute for Health and Care Excellence appraisal system makes decisions on the efficacy of a drug based on 24 weeks of clinical trials data, but fails to take into account the long-term benefit to sufferers’ quality and length of life. The focus on measuring the benefits of a treatment in terms of quality-adjusted life years does not work for genetic diseases such as cystic fibrosis, because it massively underestimates the impact that the drugs have on quality of life over the long term. It also fails to take account of the wider benefits for society of these medicines, such as the way that they can help sufferers or their carers get into work. In short, the existing system cannot provide an accurate assessment of new treatments that offer long-term, preventive stabilisation of cystic fibrosis.

I highlighted that, due to those concerns, the Cystic Fibrosis Trust was proposing an innovative solution under which real-world, long-term data could be gathered using the UK cystic fibrosis registry. The registry already...
provides real-world data to health commissioners and pharmaceutical companies, so that they can monitor the efficacy of treatments.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly important point. I congratulate him on securing this debate, which will give hope to the many people out there who suffer with cystic fibrosis. Is he aware of new 96-week data that have recently been published that show that Orkambi slows decline in lung function by around 42%? Those data were not available to NICE when it made its appraisal. Do those data alone not make the case for a further accelerated review process on this absolutely compelling?

Ian Austin: My right hon. Friend is completely right; he raises a point I will make shortly. It is good that he is here to support people with cystic fibrosis in his constituency, and to bring his knowledge and experience of the national health service to bear in the debate.

The Cystic Fibrosis Trust’s proposal would provide foundations for a managed access scheme for the drug. That was in line with the interim findings of the accelerated access review, which recommended the merits of such an approach and referred to the UK cystic fibrosis registry as an exemplar. I will say more about the accelerated access review in a few moments.

As expected, seven months later NICE referred to a lack of long-term data in rejecting Orkambi for use in the NHS. That was despite Orkambi’s being proven to halve hospitalisations and NICE’s recognising it as a “valuable new therapy for managing cystic fibrosis” with significant clinical benefits, as well as “wider benefits to society for people with cystic fibrosis and carers of people with cystic fibrosis.”

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He correctly points out that this is not just about the way in which Orkambi improves quality of life, which I know is extremely important, but about cutting hospital admissions. That has to be taken into account when we look at the wider cost implications of the drug. What we need is time for the drug to be given the chance to prove its worth.

Ian Austin: The hon. Gentleman is completely right to say that Orkambi could reduce hospital admissions, and could shorten the amount of time people spend in hospital when they have been admitted.

In its statement, NICE referred directly to the trust’s proposal as a potential solution to the shortage of long-term data. With the NICE process exhausted and seven months wasted, we hoped that the way would be clear for direct negotiations between the drug manufacturer Vertex and NHS England, which would allow for a speedy resolution to the situation. However, Department of Health officials then demanded that the drug be put through a rapid review process, which, at 16 weeks, is anything but. That process is based on exactly the same criteria that had just seen Orkambi denied to those who need it. Vertex has declined to enter the process, because of the certainty that it will come to nothing.

New data published in October at the North American cystic fibrosis conference, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) mentioned, are based on 96 weeks of trials and show that Orkambi slows the decline in lung health by up to 42%. That is comparable with the 47% slow in decline caused by the transformational treatment Kalydeco, which is widely available in the UK for a less common mutation of cystic fibrosis. Those data were unavailable to NICE but clearly illustrate that drugs such as Orkambi need the chance to prove their worth in the long term. That also underlines the fact that we now have a situation where people with cystic fibrosis face discrimination by genotype, because they are being denied the same level of treatment that people with a different genetic mutation of cystic fibrosis receive.

Twelve months after licensing, negotiations are at a standstill. I understand that Vertex is keen to offer a substantial discount, but for commercial reasons would need to do so confidentially. It would like to take up the trust’s offer of monitoring the effectiveness of Orkambi for a trial period. That could build on the American data and allow NHS England to conduct final negotiations based on an accurate reflection of the drug’s effectiveness.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I would like to thank the hon. Gentleman for securing such an important debate. One of the beauties of cystic fibrosis data is that they capture 99% of all people with the disease, so could truly be used as an exemplar. The accelerated access review calls for accurate monitoring via data, and this offers an ideal chance to do that.

Ian Austin: The hon. Lady is completely correct. It is good that she is here in the Chamber, making these important points.

Vertex is also keen to explore flexible reimbursement schemes, which would allow the NHS to manage the overall budget impact of the treatment. However, the inflexible current system insists that any offer has to be made public, rejects the trust’s solutions and offers no scope for flexible reimbursement schemes. That brings me to the accelerated access review, which was commissioned to speed up access to innovative new drugs and treatments such as Orkambi. The review was finally published in October, after a long delay, and recommends that NICE reviews its processes. It calls directly for the current system to change, to include more emphasis on the confidential commercial arrangements, flexible reimbursement arrangements and collection of real-world data that I and other Members have referred to. Those recommendations could be the key to reaching a deal that delivers Orkambi to those desperate to receive it.

When the review was commissioned last year by the Minister’s predecessor, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), he spoke of how accelerating the uptake of transformational technologies in the 21st century would attract investment in research and innovation to help us earn the prosperity we need as an advanced economy. When the review was published in October, NHS England’s chief executive, Simon Stevens, said that creating headroom for faster and wider uptake of important new patient treatments would create opportunities for the UK’s globally successful life sciences sector. The failure to deliver Orkambi undermines that vision.
We have a rigid and inflexible system, and warnings that it is not fit for purpose have been ignored throughout the process. Instead of embracing the opportunity for an innovative solution, we have been offered further negotiations based on criteria that have already failed once. That is a waste of time and taxpayers’ money and sends completely the wrong signal to a global life sciences industry currently questioning future investments here in the UK. Hugh Taylor, the review’s chair, set out the need for commitment and collaboration across Government, the NHS and the life sciences industry to make the review’s proposals a reality.

The review sets out criteria for transformational treatments that should be fast-tracked for access. Orkambi meets those criteria. It presents the perfect opportunity to put many of the review’s proposals to the test, to illustrate the commitment and collaboration needed and to demonstrate how we can come together and adapt in the light of new information. It is predicted that 95% of people with cystic fibrosis could benefit from a personalised medicine within five years. Coming up with a solution for Orkambi—one that makes sense to the NHS as well as reflecting the investment that goes into these treatments—will give us a genuine opportunity to beat this condition.

I am sure people will benefit from the review’s proposals in the years to come, but that must not be at the cost of Orkambi, which is available now. Many people with cystic fibrosis, as well as their families and carers, such as my constituents Carly Jeavons and Samantha Carrier, are watching this debate. Many of them are forced to spend weeks and months of each year in hospital, and most of all they want a chance to be able to do the everyday things we all take for granted, such as raising a family, planning a holiday or breathing without struggling. They have already endured needless delays, and as time goes on those delays present an obstacle to investment in future treatments to beat cystic fibrosis. That is not the vision set out by the accelerated access review.

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): Muscular Dystrophy UK is calling, among other things, for ring-fenced, protected funding for rare diseases. That was not included in the review to which my hon. Friend refers. Does he feel that funding for rare diseases is calling, among other things, for ring-fenced, protected funding? Will the Minister provide assurances to people watching today that the Government are listening, and that everything possible will be done to explore progressing the negotiations on Orkambi in 2017? Will he reassure them that we are capable of finding a solution next year that will bring an end to this cruel and unnecessary wait?

Will the Minister seek guidance from Government, NICE and NHS England on how the recommendations in the accelerated access review can be used to break the deadlock in negotiations? Will he meet Vertex and the Cystic Fibrosis Trust to discuss that? Samantha Carrier points out that in the 1970s, the life expectancy of cystic fibrosis sufferers was only five years old. Thankfully, that has increased greatly, but the rules for free prescriptions have not moved. When people become 18, they have to pay for their medication, despite the fact that they need these drugs to stay alive. Will the Minister look at that issue?

This is exactly how Parliament and politics in our country should work. It is our job to listen to our constituents and come here to stand up and speak out on their behalf. People like Carly Jeavons struggle to work or spend time with their family and do other things that the rest of us take for granted because they have to undergo hours and hours of treatment. New treatments have helped Carly, but others are missing out on these new drugs at the moment. People like Sam and Rob are having to come to terms with what this condition means for their newborn child, at the same time as having to care for her. All three of them—Sam, Rob and Carly—are devoting hours to raising funds or campaigning for better treatments for people with cystic fibrosis. They are an inspiration to us all; will the Minister meet Carly Jeavons, Samantha Carrier and Rob Evans and listen to them directly?

**Several hon. Members rose**

**Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair):** Six Members have made written requests to speak. Our plan, under the guidelines, is to bring in the Front-Bench spokespeople at 10.30 am, so we have little time left. If speakers and anyone making interventions are very succinct, we will get in as many Members as possible in this important debate.

9.49 am

**Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): The accelerated access review is important because it is designed “to speed up and simplify the process for getting the most promising new treatments and diagnostics safely...to patients.” That is good news for all Members of Parliament who have in their constituencies people who need access to innovative treatments. Sir John Bell states that the review “addresses one of the most important issues the National Health Service is confronting: how best to access innovation for the benefit of patients and to improve health care efficiency.” It should therefore be welcomed and receive support from both the Government and the NHS.

The report has the dual intentions of improving NHS productivity through better use of technology and of promoting the UK as a destination for life sciences. It is
clear about the areas that need to be addressed: horizon scanning, data collection, regulatory decision making, clinical and cost-effectiveness assessment and commercial decision and uptake support.

I shall focus briefly on the data collection element of the report because that is what will enable treatments to come forward and help patients. The accelerated access review sets out a mechanism for collecting data on "strategically important medical technologies". There is a clear need to collect data on technologies and their impact on the healthcare system. The review suggests that one approach should be a "commissioning through evaluation" system, whereby "complex medical technologies or diagnostic products that significantly change clinical pathways are rolled out in a number of specialist providers who are well-placed to collect impact data and build expertise around pathway change. Following this period, should the technology prove its value after assessment by NICE, it should enter routine commissioning and benefit from supported uptake".

In a recent debate that I secured on diabetes, I referred to commissioning through evaluation because I fully support the intent of that objective and believe that collecting data in that manner is an effective means of developing real-world data to support the uptake and use of modern treatments across the NHS. That type of evidence development is currently under way in the NHS, and I would like to look at one current commissioning through evaluation programme, which has been in operation since 2013. The programme launched for several technologies, covering a range of conditions. It included procedures to prevent strokes, improve the mobility of children with cerebral palsy, help patients with heart failure and improve radiotherapy for lung and liver cancer. I recognise that this debate is about cystic fibrosis in particular, but I am trying to make the point that as we collect data and bring forward the treatments, we need to ensure that they get to the people who most need them, including those whom we are talking about today.

The programme to which I have referred was structured in two phases. First was the evidence development phase, in which patients would receive the treatments and data would be collected. Second was the evidence assessment phase, in which data would be analysed and a routine commissioning policy developed. We have now reached the point in the process at which the number of procedures originally commissioned has been reached and patients will no longer be given the procedures until a formal commissioning decision has been made.

However, in answer to a parliamentary question in July, the Department of Health said it would take between one and two years to carry out the analysis. Recently, NHS England has stated that formal commissioning policies will not be in place until 2019. Those patients who would benefit from the procedures face the prospect of a two-year wait.

If we focus on just one procedure, we can see the impact that that will have on patients. Selective dorsal rhizotomy is a procedure that supports children with cerebral palsy to have increased mobility in later life. There is a narrow window in a child's development in which they can receive the treatment. A two-year gap in commissioning will mean that some children never benefit from the procedure.

This debate was initiated by the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), whom I thank for giving me the opportunity to speak. Its title on the Order Paper is "Implications of the Accelerated Access Review for cystic fibrosis and other conditions". I have referred to other conditions, but I want to finish my speech by reading out a letter from a constituent, Christine Edwards, relating to cystic fibrosis. I need add nothing to what she writes:

"Dear Mr Thomas...My niece's boyfriend, Taylor, has cystic fibrosis. He is a lovely young man and I think it is tragic that his life expectancy is so short. At the moment he is doing pretty well and his health is strong enough to support him going off to University...he did so this year.

The reality is though he can expect his health to decline and with it, his quality of life. Drugs like Orkambi offer such tremendous hope as slowing lung health decline not only offers him the potential to increase his life span directly but also allow him more opportunity to benefit from future treatment development."

Christine Edwards also writes:

"The 2,700 people with cystic fibrosis in England desperate to access Orkambi do not have the time to wait for the development of a Strategic Commercial Unit to consider a wide range of commercial arrangements. Nor do they have the time to wait for NICE and NHS England to consult on their processes.

That letter sums up why the Government must intervene and accelerate access to these transforming medical treatments. As Mrs Edwards states, patients cannot wait.

I therefore call on my hon. Friend the Minister to intervene and ask NHS England to give patients access to these innovations by ensuring a rapid and transparent decision-making process for all the innovative treatments currently undergoing commissioning through evaluation. That process should be supported by examining all available evidence and delaying while a small sample of data is analysed. I also call on the Minister to ensure patient access throughout the assessment phase by continuing to fund the procedures until a routine commissioning policy is in place, and to look at the operation of the system in the future and ensure that the design of any programme delivers continued patient access from the start of the programme through to a routine commissioning policy being in place. Finally, I call on the Minister—this is extremely important and will help large numbers of patients with cystic fibrosis and other conditions—to support wider stakeholder input into the system from those who have experience. That would include working with patient groups and industry representatives and would ensure that the NHS had the most accurate information.

9.56 am

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) for securing this very important debate.

The recommendations in the accelerated access review have been a cause of hope for many families throughout the UK. I welcome those recommendations and hope that the Minister today will reiterate the Government's commitment to their implementation. I hope that he will also give consideration to a number of possible areas of clarification that I and, I am sure, other hon. Members will raise. However, the priority is to secure the most advanced and best medicine and technology
for patients much more quickly than at present. Early access to new drugs can enhance and extend lives. It is vital not only that the UK keeps pace with other countries in approving new treatments, but that there is a consistent standard within the UK. I recognise that today’s debate focuses on NHS England, but I hope that a strong precedent is set for patients in Northern Ireland.

A few days ago, I received a letter from a constituent who feels that there is now hope. She has a four-year-old child with cystic fibrosis, which affects many of the organs in his body. She says that his life expectancy is 37, but it would be much better if there were access to Orkambi, that necessary drug. There was sadness on her part that NICE did not see fit to license the drug because of cost and a lack of necessary data. I hope that a change can take place to enable the drug to be made available.

Time limits mean that I cannot touch on every condition relevant to the accelerated access review, so I echo the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North and will focus on another condition to which the review relates and which has already been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd)—muscular dystrophy. The effects of that condition are also progressive and can range from mild to severe disability. There is a serious impact on the lives of those with the condition and their families. Sadly, it can also result in premature death, typically in childhood or early adulthood. Accelerating access to new and effective medicines and treatments is clearly vital for those affected by muscle-wasting conditions.

The recommendations around faster assessments by NICE, the flexible approval arrangement and enabling NHS England to negotiate price and flexible commercial deals at the early stages have been welcomed by Muscular Dystrophy UK. The charity has also pressed for funding to be attached to the early access to medicines scheme, so I was pleased to see its inclusion in the recommendations. However, I would draw the Minister’s attention to one recommendation in particular that I ask him to consider carefully. The accelerated access review has recommended a transformation designation and an accelerated pathway for some drugs. For some conditions that is wholly the right approach; however, in the case of muscular dystrophy the aim is to slow down muscle wastage as opposed to transforming or stopping the progression of the disease, and the medicines for muscular dystrophy are therefore incremental. I am sure that the disadvantage of incremental drugs is by no means the aim here, so I ask the Minister to take account of that and to ensure that treatments and medicines for muscular dystrophy are not overlooked.

Finally, Sir Alan, we are talking about treatments that can prolong a child’s ability to walk and to live, having profound effects on their quality of life and that of their family and carers. I look forward to the Minister’s clarification on this issue, and to an acceleration by NICE of the licensing of the drug Orkambi for cystic fibrosis sufferers.

10.1 am

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I am pleased to speak in today’s debate and join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) on securing it. I join him in congratulating the Cystic Fibrosis Trust on its work, as well as other cystic fibrosis organisations and charities across the rest of the UK on theirs. As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions, I have a strong interest in this subject and in particular how the approach taken by NICE when deciding on funding for drugs is unsuitable for drugs aimed at rare or genetic conditions.

As other Members have said, Orkambi is a particularly interesting development and is part of a new wave of gene-specific precision medicine. It tackles the underlying causes of cystic fibrosis—in this case, the defective CFTR gene—rather than simply treating the symptoms. We should be embracing this new technology and creating appropriate ways for these drugs to be approved and funded, so as not to discriminate against those with a rare or genetic disease. There may be fewer people who suffer from a rare or genetic condition, but I urge the Minister to do all he can to improve their chances. I know that he is a passionate advocate for that particular case.

The NICE process of recommendation understandably relies on data to commission the use of drugs on the NHS. However, the process is currently very rigid, which works against new, often life-changing drugs that only have trial data as evidence. That is exactly what happened with Orkambi, which only had data from a 24-week clinical trial when making its application—similar to a range of other drugs available on the market at the moment—yet evidence shows that it brings significant clinical benefits, as well as wider benefits to society, for people with cystic fibrosis and their carers.

It is not just the lack of available data that discriminates against drugs aimed at genetic and rare conditions. The NICE single technology appraisal process does not adequately reflect the potential benefits of the medicine in protecting future health deterioration or the wider holistic and societal benefits. Its thresholds for cost-effectiveness also work against those with a rare disease. Fundamentally, the diseases are rare by nature and therefore there are only a small number of eligible patients. That should not be a barrier, and we all agree that we need a system that can help those patients.

In short, the accelerated access review, which was brought about after the hard work of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), potentially holds the answers to the problems that currently beset the NICE system. It recognises that the innovative nature of new medicines means that they are unlikely to be approved through the current methods and proposes new guidelines. The new approach will help to ensure that the UK sets itself up as the best possible place to develop new drugs and, I hope, for Orkambi. The Minister might not be able to give me the answer now, but I would like him to write to me on the predicted result of the reduction of the drug spend through NHS England—as we recently heard in a series of evidence sessions held by the APPG for rare diseases—from 7% to about 3.5%, and on how the accelerated access review budget will be increased to compensate.

The Government are set to respond to the recommendations shortly. I hope that their proposal will benefit drugs such as Orkambi that are at the forefront of life science research because they treat the underlying causes of the disease, not just the symptoms, thus resulting in a lifetime of health and wellbeing benefits and savings.
Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is right to focus on the development of these drugs. My concern is not just that patients are denied access to life-changing drugs, but that our pharmaceutical industry finds this a frustrating country in which to develop new drugs and to ensure that they are available to people such as the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin).

Ben Howlett: The right hon. Lady is quite right that pharmaceutical companies, in the rare diseases space in particular, find this country a very frustrating place to come to. The message that we are going to support the industry to bring drugs to market here is not loud and clear, and there have been a range of delays and process errors. I know that the Minister and previous Ministers have tried to address this issue, but it has been a very slow, difficult and arduous process, because the message has not been heard loudly and clearly enough.

The difficulty that Orkambi is currently facing in getting funded perfectly displays the problems faced by many other innovative drugs that aim to treat rare or genetic diseases. As chair of the APPG, I get contacted by many people across the country who are desperate to see potentially life-changing drugs approved by NICE. There is a clear deficiency in the process for this type of drug, so I hope that the Minister can today announce a pilot process to show that the UK is committed to bringing drugs to market here.

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Before we proceed, I say to Members that we are running very close to the line now. A number of Members have taken the trouble to write in and I need to try to call them all, so I ask each Member to restrict whatever they bring up to a maximum of five minutes, or hopefully less.

10.7 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) on bringing it forward. One of the major issues that I seek to raise with the Government, as the Democratic Unionist party’s health spokesperson, is the treatment of rare diseases and cancers.

Cystic fibrosis is a most debilitating life-limiting disease. It is believed that one in every 2,500 babies in the UK is born with cystic fibrosis. It is a disease that affects too many households in our nation and as such one that we must address to the fullest degree and in the best way possible. As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on cystic fibrosis, I have a great interest in this work and noted, with a small amount of hope, what was being labelled as a wonder drug—Orkambi, which was touted as having significantly reduced hospital admissions and slowing the decline in lung function in people with the genetic mutations that it targets. However, we all know that this year NICE was unable to recommend Orkambi, despite acknowledging the drug as an effective treatment for the management of cystic fibrosis. Since then, negotiations between the manufacturer Vertex, the Government and NHS England have reached a deadlock. Orkambi is a precision medicine that treats the underlying genetic cause of cystic fibrosis rather than just the symptoms, and is therefore very important.

Like the hon. Member for Dudley North and others, I would like to quote people from my constituency and from Northern Ireland—one is from my constituency and one is not. I was emailed by a man from Castlederg, the hometown of my mother’s family, regarding the failure of the NHS and NICE to recommend this drug for the prescription list. Although I had read much about the drug, the human aspect was made so clear in his letter:

“With the power to lift so many of the limits cystic fibrosis can place on people with the condition, it’s vital that access is granted without delay.”

I believe that many of us in this Chamber are here to highlight and draw attention to the plight of our constituents who are crying out for the hope that this drug could bring—the difference of quality years of life for someone suffering from cystic fibrosis. My friend from Castlederg also wrote about this example of a young lady who quite clearly needs help:

“I have first hand knowledge of this drug Orkambi because my daughter Rachel who suffers from cystic fibrosis has been on it for over three years now. Rachel took part in clinical trials for two and a half years and it has transformed her life. Her lung functions have risen by 19%.”

These are more than stats—this is about her life and how Orkambi has changed it.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): A constituent of mine, Charlene Barr, passed away at the age of 20, just days before she was due to visit this House to campaign for cystic fibrosis drugs. I ask the House to pay tribute to her and her family for the fantastic work they do in Northern Ireland to raise awareness of this issue and of cystic fibrosis.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend has put his constituent’s name in Hansard as part of this debate, and I believe that is a fitting tribute to her.

My friend from Castlederg also wrote of Rachel:

“She has gained a stone in weight and has had very little coughs or colds in this period of time. In CF terms this is massive.”

He said that Rachel was 25 years of age last January and that she

“is currently doing a PhD at University and Orkambi has really given her so much energy and strength to be able to carry out such a big undertaking. Rachel has been very fortunate as Vertex have kept her on Orkambi after the trials because I suppose it would be bad looking on their part if they took her off it...I think that its only right that people that are eligible for this drug should be given the chance to receive it and to prolong their lives for many, many years and maybe even save their lives. The problem is that NICE have told the NHS that it’s too expensive at around £104,000 per year. What price do you put on a person’s life?”

I understand the way things work and I understand well the arguments regarding the likes of pancreatic cancer drugs that could add an extra year to someone’s life versus more money for the research to find a cure, but this drug could make a life such as Rachel’s much more fulfilling. When was her Dad not asked his opinion? I believe that the drug is within the NHS, as others have said, but they are available now. We look to the Minister to ensure that the opportunity is available for people to have Orkambi. People who are on Orkambi through the compassionate use programme...
are beginning to report total transformations in their health, including enough improvement to come off the lung transplant list.

I understand the time restrictions, but I will give one more example. So many people have contacted me, including Martin Keefe, whose beautiful granddaughter, Evie-May, was diagnosed with CF at three weeks old. She is now seven years old. Surely this is the time to begin this treatment, so that she has less irreversible lung damage and can look forward to a longer, healthier life. To be clear, I am not a scientist, a doctor or a researcher, but as an elected representative, I can listen to the difference that these drugs have made and could make to people's lives—to Rachel's life, Evie-May's life and the lives of many others. The research that was not available at the time of the NICE guidelines is now available and it is compelling. With great respect, we are all conveying compelling evidence and information directly to the Minister.

The review is an opportunity to do the right thing by those suffering from this disease, particularly those such as Evie-May and Rachel, who has noticed such a change. It is for those people that I ask the Department of Health to end the stalemate and make a new decision. We look forward to the Minister's giving them the Christmas present that they want and that we in this House all wish for. I understand the budgetary constraints, but the benefit of the drug appears to outweigh the financial cost. Rachel, Evie-May and others like them, UK-wide, deserve the chance to have the drug.

10.13 am

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as ever, to see you in the Chair, Sir Alan. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting us this debate. I also thank the Cystic Fibrosis Trust, which has not just been instrumental in getting MPs here today, but does great work, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) said, in supporting people with cystic fibrosis and their families. I think that Ed Owen is now moving on to other things and I particularly pay tribute to him for his work.

As I have mentioned before in this place, I have a 12-year-old niece, Maisie, who was diagnosed at Christmas in 2004 as one of the 10,500 people in the UK with cystic fibrosis. Thankfully, she is doing very well. In recent weeks, the number of constituents who have contacted me whose children, grandchildren or friends' children have cystic fibrosis has been revealing to me. Sadly, I also have constituents whose children have died from the condition. The youngest cystic fibrosis patient I have been contacted about was born in April this year. I have also been contacted by a couple of people who have 19-year-olds who are both at university, and the issue of prescription charges mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North has particularly hit home. One constituent said that, although she was very proud that her son had now gone to university hundreds of miles away, he was now responsible for managing his condition, which created some anxieties for her. She said that he was very angry that, despite being classed as a disabled student, he had to pay for his prescription. I hope that the Minister takes that on board because we have been promised a review of exemptions for many years.

As we have heard, Kalydeco, the drug that treats one particular mutation of cystic fibrosis, helps about 4% of patients in the UK. It was approved back in 2013 and the results have been dramatic, increasing lung function and reducing the time people have to spend in hospital on intravenous antibiotics. It has made a huge difference to patients' quality of life and all the signs indicate that it could significantly improve life expectancy. Now we have Orkambi, which is a combination of the drug that is marketed as Kalydeco and another drug. Orkambi targets a different mutation that affects more than 4,000 people, so it could help almost half the CF population in the country.

The clinical studies that became available last year indicated a significant reduction of 30% to 39% in lung infections and inflammations that lead to irreversible lung scarring and the need for a lung transplant. One in three patients who need a double lung transplant because of cystic fibrosis die while they are still on the waiting list. I hope that organ donation is also on the Minister's radar. Orkambi could be absolutely life-transforming. Despite that, NICE rejected it back in June because of doubts about its cost-effectiveness. It recognised that the drug is potentially a "valuable new therapy" with "significant clinical benefits", but it concluded that the cost per "quality-adjusted life year" is too high.

I acknowledge that NICE has a difficult job in assessing all the potential treatments for a range of conditions, and that it operates on a tight budget, but, as the Cystic Fibrosis Trust has argued and as we have heard this morning, the processes that NICE uses can be flawed because they rely on short-term data for a lifelong condition. We heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) that new data show that after 96 weeks of treatment—NICE only looked at the 24-week clinical trials—the decline in lung function, which is the main cause of death for people with cystic fibrosis, slows by 42%. If NICE had had that data, it would have rated Orkambi's cost-effectiveness much higher.

I am partly speaking from personal experience, but I also know from my constituents' very sad stories that people are desperate for something to address these problems. The accelerated access review was commissioned because the Government recognised the weaknesses in the NICE process. For patients whose life depends on the outcome of the report and its implementation, it has been a long wait. I urge the Minister not to delay any longer and to consider the Cystic Fibrosis Trust's request to apply the AAR recommendations to the deadlocked Orkambi negotiations. Confidential commercial agreements would free Vertex to make the NHS its best offer, and commercial agreements under the Cancer Drugs Fund are confidential. Flexible pricing arrangements would allow the consideration of alternative models to manage costs, such as a price cap that is not exceeded even if patient numbers rise, and the collection of real-world data would allow a more accurate assessment of the drug's effectiveness. The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who has now left the Chamber, mentioned the fact that 99% of cystic fibrosis patients are on the database and that there is a lot of available information about them, which makes them ideal to pilot the scheme. I hope that the Minister considers that.
10.19 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) on leading this important debate. We have long needed to address the fact that the UK is trailing behind on patient access to new medicine. A.A. Gill who, just three days ago, sadly died of cancer, wrote:

“The NHS represents everything we think is best about us.”

But in his final column, he revealed that he was denied immunotherapy that might have helped him to live longer. He said that NICE,

“the quango that acts as the quartermaster for the health service, won’t pay.”

His experiences are striking, but they are a symptom that is all too common of a system that is struggling to cope. When Labour established NICE it soon became a world leader in approaching the profound and challenging question of how to allocate scarce resources fairly. Although the question remains the same, the times have changed and the pace of innovation has increased, as has the cost.

We were all pleased when the Government’s long-awaited and much-delayed accelerated access review was finally published. Simply put, we need innovative new drugs to reach patients quickly at a price that the NHS can afford, but it is not clear that the accelerated access review has solved the conundrum. There are already signs, since publication, that yet more problems are emerging. NHS England’s sudden and unexpected consultation on the QALY—quality-adjusted life years—threshold for highly specialised technologies risks running counter to the spirit of the AAR and introducing yet another gatekeeper.

The AAR recommends a fully funded early access to medicines scheme, but we need a positive response from both the Government and NHS England because the danger is that, with other countries having funded early access companies, we risk seeing clinical development work moving away from the UK.

As we have heard, the Cystic Fibrosis Trust has suggested that the AAR made several recommendations that could enable access to drugs such as Orkambi through flexible pricing arrangements and the gathering of real-world data to prove the drug’s effectiveness. Does the Minister agree that those recommendations will make a difference to people affected by cystic fibrosis? If so, will he commit to implementing the recommendations?

Other hon. Members have told us of real-world examples, and I will quote my constituent Julian Wheel:

“My youngest daughter, a local Cambridge primary school teacher for over 15 years, recently had a new daughter, diagnosed with cystic fibrosis. It imposes major changes on her and her partner’s lives in caring for her—time, difficult nutritional choices and the fear of recurrent infection, not to mention the additional and regular workloads imposed on the NHS staff at Addenbrooke’s, the local GP practice in Harston and healthcare visitors.”

He says that their family receive terrific support from the cystic fibrosis clinic and local surgery practice, but this new drug could relieve the suffering and improve their quality of life. He says it could offer “real hope.”

New drugs are expensive, but incentivising innovation should be a priority. The Government must ensure there are effective mechanisms that can help to address the affordability challenges that new treatments are likely to present. A balance will need to be struck between setting a price that rewards and incentivises innovative research, and finding a drug that is also affordable to the NHS. Will the Minister establish a strategic commercial unit in NHS England to consider flexible pricing models?

Recommendations such as a fully funded early access to medicines scheme could make real inroads, but of course that depends on the Government supporting their implementation. The BioIndustry Association points out that innovation is impaired because the current early access to medicines scheme is not funded, and the lack of funding poses a barrier to many small biotech companies engaging with the scheme.

Across the board, organisations have called for a strong response from the Government to the accelerated access review. I am not sure we yet have that. Will we have one today?

10.22 am

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) on the spirit in which he introduced the debate and on his consensual tone. I also commend him for the quality of the case he outlined in his excellent speech. He could not have done a better job of representing his constituents and all those represented by the Cystic Fibrosis Trust.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is right to pay tribute to Ed Owen, the departing chief executive of the CF Trust, who made an enormous difference to so many people during his tenure.

I sympathise with the Minister, because I have been there when such difficult issues have arisen. I assure him that there is no party politics in this room today. We have heard excellent speeches from both sides of Westminster Hall on issues of great importance to our constituents, and Members have made their points in that spirit.

I was involved in the establishment of NICE, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) mentioned, and it did become a world leader. I am the first to say that it can never be right for politicians to sit in judgment on treatments—judging that those who shout the loudest should therefore get the treatment. NICE was established for an important reason and, as a Minister, I always sought as best I could to stick to NICE’s judgments and not to undermine them. On occasion, however, treatments would come along that were, quite simply, exceptional and that could not be considered within the narrow confines of the NICE appraisal process. Those treatments were often innovative and related to chronic conditions where the drug, if used, might have a long-term beneficial social impact, rather than an impact that would necessarily return money to the NHS budget.

To be open about the shortcomings of the NICE process that we established, NICE was not able to consider the wider public budget, the Department for Work and Pensions budget and other budgets. My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) spoke about people being able to work and care for their kids, and often the failure to fund a drug has a much wider social cost, yet the narrow process applied by NICE often did...
not take that into account. Orkambi is one such treatment where we need exceptional consideration of its potential wider impact. The accelerated access review has given the keys to the Minister. There are things that can be done, and we all urge him to use those flexibilities today.

I could say a lot more, but the best way to use the time remaining to me is to refer to some of my constituents, many of whom have been in touch to encourage me to speak today. My office manager, Karen Aspinall, has a son in his 20s who has CF. Through her, I know how it is to live day to day with the challenges presented by CF.

I close with the direct words of my constituent, Leigh resident Philip Grimshaw. He is 28 years old and his words say far more than I could. He and his sister Melissa were diagnosed with cystic fibrosis when they were very young, and this is what he wrote to me:

"Melissa was diagnosed with CF as a baby after being very unwell since birth, and I was diagnosed as a result of this, at 7 years old. All our lives we have had to take a cocktail of medications and have had frequent stays in hospital.

In my opinion Orkambi would, amongst other things, reduce the number of hospital stays and also reduce the need for occasional extra antibiotics due to CF related illness (because we would be in better health, and the risk of getting an infection is lower). Both of these mentioned would save the NHS money. I understand that it’s not a cheap medication but neither is a two week hospital stay, on a specialised ward, on extra antibiotics, six times or more a year.

I do think that the stress of losing our mum had an impact on Melissa’s health."

Sadly, Melissa died in 2013. The letter continues:

"The problem with CF is that once your health starts to slide, it’s very difficult to bring back to where it should be. If Melissa was on Orkambi then it could have kept her in a better state of health and prevented her becoming as ill as she was and would have prevented the worst.

As for me: I’m looking to settle down and have children in the near future. Orkambi would help me to watch my children grow up rather than live to the predicted age of being in my 50s. I have had the dilemma of whether or not to pay into a pension because I won’t live to see retirement age and maybe even not long enough to be able to take a lump sum out at 55!

Orkambi can change that. It would be nice to have the confidence to know that I could see my children graduate university, start jobs and have children of their own.

I am sure that Philip’s words would be shared by many other people in their 20s, or younger, with cystic fibrosis if they had the opportunity to vent them in this place. They are the appropriate words on which to finish.

I recognise the difficulties, but we were here before with Kalydeco and we managed to find a way through. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East said, nobody now doubts that that drug has made a huge difference to so many lives. We are in exactly the same position again, so let us learn from that experience. Let us not test people’s patience. Let us get the appraisal process moving towards a positive resolution. I realise that that is a challenge, but Ministers sometimes need to cut through the bureaucracy. The Minister is a good man, and I urge him to do that today.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Access to new drugs seems to be almost the commonest theme of debates in Westminster Hall. Having spent years as a breast cancer specialist involved in trials, I can say that it is really frustrating to have access to drugs within a trial and then lose that access when the drug is passed.

The United Kingdom can be up to five years behind Europe or America in accessing such drugs. We talk all the time about having more research on brain tumours and other diseases, but that doesn’t help us if, at the end of the research, our patients cannot get the drugs.

Cystic fibrosis is one of the commonest of what we call the rare diseases. It involves a problem with transmission of salts through membranes, which results in incredibly thick mucus that clogs various organs, most commonly the lungs. As the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) mentioned, if it is diagnosed late, damage will already have been done. The earlier patients with cystic fibrosis are treated, the less damage is done and the healthier they are. The life expectancy has changed from childhood to middle age, due to a combination of approaches.

I am shocked to hear that people in England with cystic fibrosis have to pay for their prescriptions, because that would amount to quite a lot of money; they are on a lot of medication. We do not have prescription charges at all in Scotland, because you get an increased rate of people not collecting their prescription, or going to the chemist and saying, “Excuse me, dear, which are the two most important drugs for me to take?” and that ends up not being cost-effective. I would have thought that people with a chronic condition should at least have their names on a list as being exempt. I would have thought that that was the least the Government could do.

The right hon. Member for Leigh said that we have been through this with Kalydeco and many other drugs. Orkambi is a synergistic combination of Kalydeco, or ivacaftor, with lumacaftor, which makes it work much better. They are the first drugs that are not just antibiotics or mucolytics; they are trying to attack the disease itself. In that sense, they are transformative. The problem in the access review is that the definition of “transformative” going forward will not necessarily help those drugs. We do not suddenly find a drug that is a cure for any of these conditions; we move step by step, often adding drugs together or making new discoveries.

There is a real concern among those who develop drugs that in the consultation between NICE and NHS England, the levels considered acceptable for such highly specialised treatments are being changed. The problem is that if we send out the message to people with rare conditions, “I’m sorry; you’re just outside the pale,” we will be letting them down. We need a different approach. I think we need a different conversation for all drugs. The NHS in the United Kingdom brings a cohesive system that allows for follow-up data and allows a lot more information to be sent back to companies over time, which is not easily available in other countries. That should be on the table as part of the negotiations.

I have a real concern, going forward after Brexit, that in this country we will be further down the list for people to even apply for licences here. It may well be that the application to the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency for 60-odd million people in the United Kingdom may well cost an amount very similar to an application to the European Medicines Agency for a market of 450 million. That means we could end up in the same position as Canada, where it often takes about a year before a company decides to apply for a licence. The problem is that if, going forward, companies see that they must pay to apply to NICE,
which will turn them down so they will have to pay to apply again, they may just decide that it is not worth the candle. That must be taken into consideration.

Obviously, England has the Cancer Drugs Fund, the idea of which is to allow a little bit of flexibility on access to new drugs, which are often expensive, but it does not help you if you do not have cancer. In Scotland, ours is a new medicines and rare diseases fund, which as a proportion of the population is three times the size of CDF, so it is more flexible. It cannot be a long-term solution for such drugs, or the funds would get sucked up, but it is important that when we are going through a phase of considering the real-life use of expensive drugs we have some flexibility for patients, and not just cancer patients.

We had a debate in the main Chamber last week about the Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill, and one discussion involved funding. In Scotland, the pharmaceutical rebate goes to fund the new medicines and rare diseases fund. In England, it goes back into core funding, which means that along the line, the beneficiary is the Treasury. If the NHS is managing attribution and access to new drugs in such a way that it gets a rebate, it should be able to use that to access more innovative drugs. That is why the pharmaceutical industry agreed to it. It also creates a better relationship with the pharmaceutical industry. We cannot have a situation where the industry just pulls a price out of the air and we must rise to it—of course we must get value for money—but it is really important that we do not leave people with certain conditions knowing that there is utterly no chance that they or their children will access treatment.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), for their excellent contributions, as well as the many others who have made valuable interventions. I also thank the Cystic Fibrosis Trust for its dedicated campaigning on the issue, and the 20,000 people who have been involved in its survey, in the digital debate here in Parliament, and in petitions and e-action. The concerns and the need for action are clear, and it is up to the Minister to give all those people beyond this place the answers that they need.

In my contribution, I will set out why the Opposition want to see the Government do more on innovative drugs, through case studies involving Orkambi. I will touch on issues of access to Orkambi and other drugs for those living with cystic fibrosis and expand into the recommendations of the accelerated access review, which can do much to address many of the issues involving access to new drugs.

Although it is welcome that the prescription drug Kalydeco was given the go-ahead by NHS England last week for two to five-year-olds as part of re-prioritisation, Orkambi remains an issue. There is currently a deadlock in negotiations between the pharmaceutical company Vertex, the Government and NHS England for the drug to be accessible to the 2,700 people who stand to benefit from it. As we have heard in detail today, that is all down to rejection of the drug under NICE’s appraisal system because there is a lack of long-term data. Although it is welcome that NICE recognises the treatment as effective in managing cystic fibrosis, it is clear that we desperately need a new system under which drugs can be better accessed, especially those that show that they can benefit patients. We have also heard about new data that NICE did not take into account and that would have showed 42% effectiveness.

Orkambi has been shown to halve the amount of hospitalisation of cystic fibrosis sufferers, and 96-week data published recently showed that it can help to slow lung function decline by 42%. The data are also backed up by anecdotal evidence from people who have accessed Orkambi through the compassionate use programme and are beginning to report transformations in their health—some are reporting enough improvement to come off the lung transplant list. That information is all positive. It should be made better available for consideration as part of the appraisal process; it should also form part of the negotiations between Vertex, the Government and NHS England. However, when we see a deadlock, all of that information is for naught. Thousands of people are suffering irreversible lung damage that could be stopped if the current impasse between those around the negotiating table was broken. Those who will suffer the most are stuck in the middle.

It is up to the Government to facilitate the end of the deadlock so that people can access Orkambi and see their lives transformed. One way to do that is to begin the job of implementing the recommendations set out in the accelerated access review, which the Opposition welcome. The goal of speeding up access to drugs by cutting four years off the time needed to bring new medicines to patients is something that we should all welcome; we need to see whether it can be achieved. The review has the potential to change the philosophy of the NHS in line with the five-year forward view, but also to help to maintain our global lead in life sciences. The recommendations set out in its final report have the
potential to transform how we provide drugs and treatments, ensuring that we see innovation in drugs, diagnostic tools and healthcare developments. However, there still remain issues around thresholds for new drugs, which NICE and NHS England are currently consulting on. I understand that some associations and charities have raised concerns about that, and I hope that the Minister will update us on some of those discussions.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): My hon. Friend is right to be so positive about many aspects of the accelerated access review. However, as she has mentioned, there are concerns that new definitional rules could be created by some of the terms of the review, which could lead to some patients and some promising drugs being trapped in exactly the sort of deadlock that she has described.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend is right to raise those concerns. We do not want to move into a new system that will create new unintended consequences. Perhaps the Minister will touch on that in his speech.

Although some are calling for interim solutions to help people who are stuck waiting for the accelerated access review’s recommendations to be implemented, it is also important that the Government get on with implementing those changes. The review was announced more than a year ago and was published two months ago now. It is important to remember that the transformation that we all want to see will not happen straight away, but it is still right that we keep up the pressure for the recommendations to be implemented. There are many such recommendations, and I hope that the Minister will be able to update us today on the progress on each of them. There are two in particular that illustrate what can be done to resolve the deadlock around Orkambi—the immediate establishment of an accelerated access partnership and the setting up of a new flexible strategic commercial unit.

The accelerated access partnership is one way in which, through co-ordination and collaboration across the system, we could see drugs brought on to the market more quickly to benefit patients who need access to them. I would be interested to hear from the Minister what progress has been made on its creation, especially in conjunction with the issues surrounding the deadlock on Orkambi.

It is clear that the strategic commercial unit could help to benefit those who wish to see Orkambi offered on the NHS. The unit could work with those involved in this dispute to end the current deadlock through facilitation of the flexibility and transformational change promised by the accelerated access review. That would go some way towards helping to access data on drugs such as Orkambi and getting them out to patients. There is a willingness out there for that flexibility to be brought into the system; for example, the Cystic Fibrosis Trust has offered to use the UK cystic fibrosis registry to help to provide essential data that can help to prove how effective drugs can be and what more needs to be done. We have already heard how substantial that registry is; it includes 99% of sufferers. I understand that the trust’s offer has been welcomed by all sides in the negotiations but is blocked due to the lack of progress in implementing the changes set out in the review. I hope that the Minister will give us some clarity on when the unit will be created and when we can see a culture shift within the system that will allow for flexibility to accept data and information that show how much effect these drugs have on people’s lives.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Does the hon. Lady share my concern about drugs for other conditions, such as sofosbuvir for hepatitis C? Even after they get NICE approval, those more expensive drugs are now being rationed at the NHS England stage. At the moment we are fighting to get through NICE, but it needs to be a smooth path all the way through.

Mrs Hodgson: The cost of drugs sometimes leads the NHS into the terrible and unfortunate situation in which rationing seems to become the norm. There can also be a postcode lottery, which is another element that we need to look at. The price of drugs really is the crux of the issue.

In conclusion, I hope that the Minister will offer some insight into the progress being made on the recommendations of the accelerated access review. The case of Orkambi can help to drive through these changes and to end this deadlock, which, as we have heard, is causing unnecessary suffering for those living with cystic fibrosis. The review has established a space for change and for patients to access new and innovative drugs and treatments. It is important that there is no stalling or delay in transforming the system, because people’s lives depend on the changes called for by the review. I am sure that the Minister will keep that in mind when he goes back to his officials.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): It is good to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Alan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) on leading the charge in this debate. The right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) rightly said in his very good speech that this is not really a political issue. Every Member in this Chamber has constituents who would benefit from these drugs. There are 10,500 people in the country with cystic fibrosis and it is massively important that we do everything we can to make progress on the issue. I also congratulate the Cystic Fibrosis Trust on its work and on its “Stopping the Clock” campaign. Debates such as this give prominence to these issues and to the need to make progress.

The debate is really about two drugs, a drugs company and an evaluation process. I shall speak about all of those and about where we are going with the accelerated access review. The two drugs are Kalydeco, which applies to something like 4% of cystic fibrosis sufferers, and Orkambi, which would apply to a further 40% of sufferers. Both are relatively small populations: for Kalydeco it is something like 400 people in England, and for Orkambi it is something like 2,700 or 3,000. Kalydeco has been routinely available on the NHS since 2013. As mentioned today, it was extended on 4 December to children aged two to five. It makes a big difference and we are pleased to have made that progress. Both Kalydeco and Orkambi are produced and owned by a Boston-based drugs company called Vertex, which I shall talk about later.

Orkambi could be used by around 3,000 patients. It has a price of something like £100,000 per annum—the implication being that the cost of its approval in England would be in the order of £300 million or £400 million a
year. As several Members have said, it is obviously right that there is a process that weighs that cost of £300 million to £400 million a year against other NHS priorities and other drugs. That process is the NICE process. A number of comments have been made about the efficacy of that process, and it has been suggested that it may have deficiencies in respect of providing precision drugs to small numbers of users. I will try to address those concerns. I think everybody agrees that we need a consistent method of evaluating these matters, and there needs to be a way forward based on that.

When NICE evaluated Orkambi in July, it found that it had clinically significant and important benefits, which several Members have spoken about. There is no dispute about that, but the evaluation process—which is based on quality-adjusted life years, as has been said—also found that it was not cost-effective. I spent some time last night reading the NICE evaluation, and make the point to colleagues and other Members that it was not a near miss. It looks like there is a factor of 10 in NICE’s evaluation of its cost-effectiveness. I guess that is largely driven by the price of £100,000 per annum and what that would mean.

Andy Burnham: It is obviously reassuring to everybody that the Minister has taken such a close interest in the issue before coming to the debate. He says it was not a near miss. That may have been the case on the data that NICE had, but does he accept the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) and other Opposition Members that those data were very limited indeed? The 96-week trial data that are now available would probably have produced a very different overall calculation.

David Mowat: To be honest, I am not qualified to have an opinion on that. The right hon. Gentleman rightly said that decisions of this sort should not be made by politicians and that there has to be a process around them. It is clear that if NICE is presented by Vertex with new clinical data, or indeed new price data—this is perhaps equally relevant, but we have not really discussed it—a review could be carried out quickly without any need for us to go through the whole process again. There is a precedent for that, and if those data exist and Vertex presents them, they would be looked at. I give my commitment, and certainly that of the Minister responsible for this policy area, that that would be the case and there is no impediment to that. I do not want to raise false hopes by saying that, and I do not think I have done so. The fact that it is not a near miss—it is possibly out by a factor of eight or 10—implies that there is quite a lot of work to do on pricing.

It is worth recapping what other countries have done. Orkambi is available in Germany, although it appears from the data available that its use there is quite mixed, with perhaps no more than one in five eligible people having access to it. In France, the other country in Europe that has authorised it, Vertex has booked no sales yet this year. The picture seems quite mixed in those countries. The countries that have not authorised Orkambi include Scotland.

Jim Shannon: In my speech I mentioned a young girl from my constituency, Rachel, who has been on the Orkambi trials and shown exemplary improvements in her health. That is an example we can all point to of where goodness has come out of the drug for those who have had the opportunity to have it, and that is true not only in my constituency but throughout the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

David Mowat: There is no dispute that the drug works, and there is no dispute at all that it is life-changing. The issue before us is the extent to which it justifies a price tag of £300 million to £400 million versus other NHS priorities. All I can say on that is that it is right that the decision is not made by politicians, for the reasons given earlier by the right hon. Member for Leigh.

I was discussing the countries that have so far not authorised Orkambi. Neither Scotland nor the Republic of Ireland accepted that it was cost-effective, and it is not used in Scandinavia or Canada either.

Mark Durkan: The Minister mentioned Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, where there are clearly challenges—we only have to look at the pictures in The Irish Times yesterday to see the graffiti about Orkambi in Dublin. Will he commit to working with colleagues from across these islands to use the underdeveloped and underused machinery of the British-Irish Council to literally get our act together when it comes to rare diseases? We should combine our purchasing power when negotiating with the drugs companies and ensure that there are much better networks for referral and treatment. We should improve that collaboration and literally get our act together on these islands.

David Mowat: I, too, saw the press. I think the Republic of Ireland’s Minister has talked about writing around to that effect, and it would be a great idea were we to use our combined procurement muscle in that regard. He is certainly pressing at an open door.

I wish to spend a little time talking about Vertex. The company owns the drugs we are discussing and is worth $18 billion. As well as looking at the NICE review last night, I spent quite a lot of time looking at Vertex’s financial position. The company needs to sell these products; indeed, its continued functioning as a major pharmaceuticals company depends on that. Its share price has fallen by a third during the course of this year—I estimate that is a loss of value of something like $7 billion—because its sales are not adequate. There needs to be a meeting of minds here. I am sure that people from Vertex are listening to this debate, as will people from other places, too. We all want a solution whereby the drug becomes available at a cost-effective price, but the negotiation is not a one-way street; Vertex is part of it as well. Were the company to come forward with different pricing data, those would be looked at very quickly. At some point in the future—I know it will be a long time—the drug will be available generically, although I accept that that will not give hope to some of the people we have heard about today.

In the couple of minutes I have remaining, I wish to discuss the accelerated access review, which was a manifesto commitment we made at the election. We set up the review panel. The basic intent was to enable transformative drugs to come forward more quickly and for there to be, as Members have mentioned, a commercial unit in the
NHS that is empowered to do deals and bring treatments forward more rapidly. In October the review team and panel published the final report, to which something like 600 stakeholders contributed. It is a valuable piece of work and we know its direction of travel: bringing drugs into the system more quickly, allowing the NHS to set priorities for the drugs its wants, and giving drugs companies some notice and knowledge that if they develop drugs, they will be used. That will mean that a lot of the commercial discussions can happen earlier and progress can be made more quickly.

The Government are reviewing the results of the accelerated access review. There is much in it, if not all of it, that will be accepted, although I am not in the position to accept it today—that is not my role here. We do, though, want to make progress, which should give some hope for the potential of another review of the matters we have been discussing. Nevertheless, I must say again to Government and Opposition Members that the NICE process and the people carrying it out—they are rigorous scientists and serious doctors—need to be treated and understood with respect. We can all agree that the current situation is heartbreaking for many people. The world has a drug that would change people’s lives, but the world has not rolled that drug out to them because of real and reasonable financial issues. I accept that that is a very difficult thing to explain to people and it is very difficult to accept.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Education: Knowsley

11 am

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered education in Knowsley.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan; I am sure we will be treated impartially and fairly. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Marie Rimmer) had hoped to be here, but she is currently recovering from an accident; she wanted me to make it clear that she would be here if she was fit.

Secondary education in Knowsley has received attention in this House and in the media recently, particularly as a result of the report by the ResPublica think-tank. Unless urgent action is taken, at the end of this academic year not a single education institution in Knowsley will offer A-level provision.

Let me say first a word about the ResPublica report, which was commissioned by Knowsley Council. The Prime Minister is known for weighing up matters before pronouncing on them, but I doubt that she had actually read the report before quoting from the press release about it at Prime Minister’s questions on 16 November; if she had, she would have noticed that the report that the council received in May did not mention grammar schools at all. In Knowsley, 39% of the secondary school population attends schools in neighbouring boroughs, which amounts to 3,164 school students and takes more than £17 million a year out of Knowsley’s education system. Unchecked, that is in danger of escalating to the point at which secondary education in the borough becomes unviable.

Let me be clear: parents rightly decide what is the best education for their children and my comments should in no way be taken as a criticism of people who choose to send their children to schools outside Knowsley—that is their right. However, the fact that they do so does challenge us to improve attainment levels, and education in Knowsley needs some radical changes. Frankly, the problems we face would not be resolved by the creation of a grammar school. Indeed, it would make matters worse for the overwhelming majority of school students. For example, the Education Policy Institute yesterday concluded that, overall, its analysis “supported the conclusions reached by the OECD for school systems across the world – that there is no evidence that an increase in selection would have any positive impact on social mobility.”

Sir Michael Wilshaw, head of Ofsted, said:

“The notion that the poor stand to benefit from the return of grammar schools strikes me as palpaable tosh and nonsense.”

I think he put that firmly enough.

Together with my hon. Friends the Members for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and for St Helens South and Whiston, I have been exploring possibilities for ensuring that A-level provision in the borough continues beyond 2017. We had a meeting with the schools Minister in June. There are potential solutions. At a recent meeting with the principal of Knowsley Community College about the proposed merger with St Helens College, I was pleased to hear that, if the merger goes ahead, they have some serious ideas about how to restore viable A-level provision in the borough.
Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that for a borough such as Knowsley, which has a substantial population, the idea of having no academic A-level provision is embarrassing for all the schools and education institutes? It does not bode well for the future of the borough if our young people cannot get the education they need—of whatever variety—in the place that they live.

Mr Howarth: My hon. Friend puts that very well. I agree with her entirely and was just going on to add a word about the impact of the negative publicity and comment.

Before setting out some ideas that I believe will help improve secondary education, I want to note some positive things that are already happening. Hard-working heads and teachers are understandably demoralised at the continual denigration that they experience in the media and from the Government; parents and school students are understandably upset that their hard work and achievements are continually rubbed out. Yet there is so much good work going on that never gets a mention.

Ten days ago, for example, I visited the Lord Derby Academy, part of the Dean Trust, and met head of school Vicky Gowan and assistant headteacher, Josette Arnold. On a tour of the school, it was obvious that they were doing a lot right. The sense of discipline and the rigorous approach to teaching were obvious and commendable, and promise to bring about big improvements. Much the same could be said for the other secondary schools in Knowsley. Similarly, I recently had the privilege of opening the new Northern Logistics Academy in Kirkby, a joint undertaking between St Helens College and Knowsley Community College. It provides logistics training for those seeking to work in that industry, which is a real growth industry in our city region.

Knowsley Council, having disowned the ResPublica report, has now established an education commission, chaired by Christine Gilbert, previously chief inspector of schools in England and head of Ofsted, and supported by other distinguished commissioners, which is charged with producing an improvement plan. That approach should be supported and I would ask the Minister to commit the Government to that. It is worth noting that the commission has the potential to signpost ways in which other deprived areas such as Knowsley can also make appropriate improvements.

Two developments which could lift achievement are the Shakespeare North and Bio-Inspire projects. Both implicitly offer opportunities to raise aspiration for school students in Knowsley, and I hope that the Government will continue to support both initiatives.

If we are to improve social mobility in areas such as Knowsley, the single most powerful engine for doing so is education. That being so, and given Knowsley’s high level of deprivation, it came as a surprise that Knowsley was not one of the six opportunity areas recently announced by the Government. I feel that the methodology used to identify those areas was flawed. Will the Minister undertake to review the methodology? Will she undertake to look at how Knowsley could be included in any further strategies to improve social mobility?

I want to make a suggestion about how educational attainment could be improved. Before doing so, I should say a word about how attainment is measured. Attainment 8 measures a student’s average grade across eight subjects, which are the same subjects that count for progress 8. Those new metrics are a significant change to education reporting; performance measurement is spread across a wider range of subjects and is no longer based solely on attainment, and there is an emphasis on progress.

Knowsley ranks bottom in the north-west, with an overall attainment 8 score of 39, compared with Liverpool on 47 and Trafford, which is top, on 57. It also has the lowest progress 8 score in the north-west, with a score of minus 0.88 compared with Liverpool on minus 0.35. Those figures illustrate the scale of the challenge in Knowsley.

I expect that the commission established by Knowsley Council will look at how post-14 education could be radically reorganised. There is, in my view, a case to be made for creating a choice post-14, but not through a grammar school. Many students in their later years do not regard the sort of education on offer as suited to their future aspirations. Sir Michael Wilshaw has, on a number of occasions, called for a skills revolution in the UK, arguing that every multi-academy trust should run a vocational university technology college for youngsters aged 14 to 19. He said:

“We need to say to youngsters, ‘there are other paths than university.’ If you’re going to make a success of Brexit, this should be the number one priority of government. Not grammar schools ... Otherwise we won’t have the skills. And the prospects for growth in the economy and productivity in the economy will suffer.”

Maria Eagle: Does my right hon. Friend accept that Halewood Academy closed its sixth form not because it no longer wished to teach A-levels but because, and I do not blame the head and the governors for their decision, financially it is obliged to balance its budget and it simply no longer had enough pupils wanting to go into the sixth form—for various reasons—to enable it financially to continue? As a consequence, there is now no academic A-level provision in the entire borough. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is commendable that Knowsley, which has no longer has any levers to provide education in its own borough and gets blamed when it goes wrong, has done what it can in establishing the commission? We hope that the Government will do what they can, in supporting that process, for all the young people and families in Knowsley.

Mr Howarth: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. She is right to point out the limited scope of Knowsley Council, which is the local authority that has suffered the greatest cuts in the country while also being among those with the highest need. As I said earlier—it is an extension of my hon. Friend’s point—it is no longer viable to offer sixth-form provision in Knowsley, and if we do not do something urgently it will become unviable to offer any kind of secondary education at all. I agree with my hon. Friend, and I also agree with Sir Michael Wilshaw.

In many cases it would be more effective if the opportunity for vocational education were available post-14, offering pupils a programme of GCSEs, technical and professional qualifications and work experience. That is not to say that those who aspire to a more academic education should not have that choice but, rather, that it should be a choice and not the only option.
Time does not allow me to give a detailed account of how such a reorganisation would need to be carried out. Who would offer the more vocational post-14 option and could the existing secondary system be adapted to provide the more academic option? Those are examples of tough questions that need to be worked through. It is also essential that the vocational and technical education courses on offer are of a high quality and of equal status to the conventional curriculum.

I should perhaps declare an interest at this point. I was one of the generation who left secondary school at 15 but went to technical college. I studied engineering and then went on to do an engineering apprenticeship. Later, in my 20s, I did a degree. Those were options I had, and options I could take, and my worry is that such options are no longer available for young people, other than through the apprenticeship system. The problem with some apprenticeships is that they are too narrowly focused on the needs of the employer and, therefore, the young people who go through them do not acquire the transferable skills that might be needed when they are ready to move on to another employer. Post-14 opportunities in vocational education offer the prospect of their gaining those skills.

I am clear, as is Knowsley Council and my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood, that improvement is essential, and that a great deal of responsibility sits on the shoulders of the commissioners to come up with a way forward. Again, I ask the Minister to endorse secondary. Finally, it is important to point out that I have first-hand knowledge that young people in Knowsley are no less capable and no less ambitious than young people from better-off families. They deserve the same opportunities as young people from other parts of the country and from more prosperous areas. I hope that the Government will work with Knowsley Council, the commission, my hon. Friends the Members for Garston and Halewood and for St Helens South and Whiston, and me to ensure that that is exactly what happens.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) on securing this really important debate and on the obvious passion and understanding with which he speaks about the challenges in his constituency. I also thank the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for her support today, and I add my voice to those wishing the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Marie Rimmer) a speedy recovery.

I know that we all share the Government’s ambition to build a country that works for everyone, and that means providing a good school place for every child, one that caters to their individual talents and abilities and, indeed, their needs. Thanks to the incredible hard work of teachers and the action we have taken over the past six years, there are now more pupils in “good” or “outstanding” schools than in 2010. But if just one child in England is not able to access a good school, that is, of course, one too many, and that is a particular issue in Knowsley, where none of the six secondary schools is “good” or “outstanding”.

Provisional 2016 results for secondary schools in the borough show that pupils, on average, make half a grade less progress than other pupils nationally with the same prior attainment. Knowsley has been the lowest-performing local authority at secondary level for a number of years. I absolutely understand, therefore, why the right hon. Gentleman has raised this really important issue. We are working in partnership with Knowsley Council and other key stakeholders in the region to improve and extend the reach of high-performing schools and leaders, to provide the best possible outcomes for Knowsley’s young people, which is, of course, absolutely nothing less than they deserve.

Maria Eagle: Will the Minister put on the record today the fact that she and her Government will work with the local authority and local MPs to ensure that academic A-level provision is available from next September when Halewood Academy’s sixth form unfortunately ceases? We must not send a signal to all young people of an academic bent in Knowsley that they have to leave the borough to continue their education.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that issue. I understand that the regional schools commissioner is meeting Lord Nash and local MPs in early January to discuss options for A-level provision in the area. Those options are being explored by the Department for Education as we speak. I also know that the educational issue across the board in Knowsley is one on which people are working very collaboratively. We have a number of strong multi-academy trusts in the north-west that are now supporting schools within Knowsley; and the regional schools commissioner, in conjunction with the education commission, is bringing them together for a roundtable discussion next week to consider some of the challenges around school performance in the borough and other issues.

The leader of Knowsley Council, Andy Moorhead, has acknowledged that educational performance in the local authority needs to improve. He recognises that although over the years a number of actions have been put in place to address the issue, a different approach is now needed. That is why we very much welcome the launch of the Education Commission for Knowsley, which I hope will provide that new approach. The commission will work closely with the Department for Education and national and local leaders in education, as well as with business partners, to address the underlying causes of educational under-performance in the area. The commission will draw on the expertise and knowledge of its members who are key leaders in education at a local, regional and national level, including Christine Gilbert, the former chief inspector of schools, Vicky Beer, the regional schools commissioner for Lancashire and West Yorkshire, and Sir Kevan Collins, chief executive of the Education Endowment Foundation.

I know that the commission will want to work closely with those who work in local schools; they are the real experts, who have clear views on how to get the much-needed improvement. The right hon. Member for Knowsley is right that we should be championing the dedication and commitment of the hard-working teaching professionals in our local schools, seeking to support, not denigrate, and seeking to encourage, not undermine. The commission will want to focus not only on immediate
interventions to make visible improvements, but on long-term measures to ensure that all pupils achieve their full potential and leave school with confidence and ambition.

On A-level provision, we are working in partnership with Knowsley Council and other key stakeholders in the region, such as Learn and Lead and the Liverpool city region combined authority, to improve and extend the reach of high-performing schools and leaders to look for that solution and provide high-quality A-levels. I have already spoken about the meeting in January with the regional schools commissioner and Lord Nash.

To clear up the confusion that the right hon. Gentleman rightly raised about the ResPublica report, the version that was seen in May was a very early draft. The final report, “Achieving Educational Excellence in Knowsley”, did not come out until October. That is the one that acknowledges the transformative impact that grammar schools can have on the life chances of less well-off pupils. The Prime Minister has been clear that every child should be allowed to rise as far as their talents will take them, and that their background should not be a barrier. We want all pupils to have access to a good local school, which is why we are consulting on reforms to a number of different schools, including not only grammar schools, but independent and faith schools.

Mr George Howarth rose—

Caroline Dinenage: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman in a moment, but I will make a tiny bit of progress first; he has asked me a number of questions and I do not want to leave anything out.

We want to tap into the expertise of all these types of schools and spread the knowledge across the system, so that every child has access to a good space. That is what the consultation is all about, and it is still open. We are considering how new grammar schools can open where parents want them, but with strict conditions to make sure that they improve the education of pupils in other parts of the system. We believe that all “good” and “outstanding” schools that have the capacity to expand should be able to do so to meet the demands of parents in their local area. Our proposals will also result in more universities and independent schools sponsoring academies and establishing free schools. There are positive examples of that happening in Merseyside, where, for example, the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts has set up a free school.

The Government’s reforms have increased autonomy in the education system, placing a relentless focus on improving standards and tackling underperformance and encouraging innovative partnerships to improve existing schools and create new ones. The right hon. Gentleman was absolutely right to raise the issue of post-14 technical education—he is one of the great alumni of that sort of system. Fourteen to sixteen-year-olds are able to take up high-quality, technical applied qualifications alongside their GCSEs, enabling students to gain valuable experience in a range of subjects not normally covered by GCSEs and develop practical and technical skills. Up to three technical awards can count in headline performance measures.

Mr George Howarth: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Dinenage: I will in a moment, when I get to the end of this bit; the right hon. Gentleman was very keen to talk about technical education and I do not want to miss anything out. As he will be aware, 48 university technical colleges are currently open. A further seven are in development and plan to open in 2017 and beyond, and along with the 48 open UTCs, they will create opportunities for more than 35,000 young people to train as the engineers and scientists of the future.

Mr George Howarth: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I do not want to make a big issue of the Prime Minister’s comments at Prime Minister’s questions; I just want to set the record straight. Knowsley Council received the report that it commissioned from ResPublica in May, and that did not include any reference, in any form, to the need for a grammar school in the borough. As I understand it— I spoke to the local authority at some length yesterday—the only reference to a grammar school was in a press release, which I assume the Prime Minister was quoting from. It was not in the body of the report that the council received.

Caroline Dinenage: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising that point, which we will look into. My understanding is that the very early draft in May did not refer to grammar schools, but that the final report, which came out in October, did. However, I will pass his comments back to the Department.

Maria Eagle rose—

Caroline Dinenage: I am very aware of the time—it will have to be quick.

Maria Eagle: Is the Minister saying that a new grammar school in Knowsley is the solution that the Government might come up with?

Caroline Dinenage: No, what I am saying is that it is all about choice, flexibility, keeping our options open and listening to people’s views. That is what the consultation is all about. It is not about writing anything off, because we do not want to write off our children’s future. We want to consider any changes that will bring about the best possible social mobility for all those in our schools. We want every child to be able to fulfil their potential.

I will briefly talk about the opportunity areas for social mobility, as the right hon. Member for Knowsley was concerned about that issue. I understand his frustration that Knowsley was not included in that, because it is the lowest-performing authority at secondary level. However, it is not the weakest in the social mobility index, so it is not currently considered an opportunity area. Opportunity areas have been selected as social mobility “cold spots”, where we will trial new ways of addressing entrenched problems. However, we will use the learning from those areas to spread excellence to other areas, which will, of course, include areas such as Knowsley, where we want outcomes in schools to improve. We also want to go beyond schools and make sure that all programmes, from early years to accessing employment, help to break the link between a person’s background and what they achieve as adults. That is fundamentally very important.

I am very pleased that the right hon. Gentleman has raised these issues today. He is absolutely right that we must ensure that this country works for everyone, not
just the privileged few. It is so essential to create a socially just and socially mobile society, in partnership with fantastic teachers, strong schools and college leaders. We must all work together to ensure that the Government’s education reforms will be successful in raising educational standards for all.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Operation Midland: Henriques Report

[Mr Gary Streeter in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered Operation Midland and the Henriques report.

I am very grateful to you, Mr Streeter, for chairing this debate today, and to hon. Members from all parties in the House who have come to take part in this important debate.

One of the founding purposes of our Parliament, which was established 751 years ago, was for the redress of grievances. So let me say from the outset that where people—particularly the young and the vulnerable—have been abused by others, however high the alleged perpetrator is, they are not above the law. That was an assertion of the late and great Lord Denning, which is not in dispute.

What is in dispute, and the subject of this debate, is the manner in which a number of police forces have chosen to operate and the rules under which they have operated.

Today I make no apologies for seeking to highlight what I and many others consider to be a major miscarriage of justice by the Metropolitan police and indeed by other police forces across the land. I intend to concentrate my remarks on Operation Midland, which involved the pursuit of unfounded claims that sexual offences were committed by the former Home Secretary, the late Lord Brittan; the former Chief of the Defence Staff and distinguished Normandy veteran, Field Marshal The Lord Bramall; and my long-standing friend, Harvey Proctor. Mr Proctor was also accused of murdering three children. I served in this House with both Leon Brittan and Harvey Proctor, and I have met the Field Marshal and his late wife, Lady Bramall, a number of times.

Other well-known people, such as Sir Cliff Richard, Paul Gambaccini and even the late Prime Minister, our former colleague Sir Edward Heath, have also been caught up in this scandal of police failure and mismanagement. However, such is the weight of evidence against—

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Would he just care to reflect on precisely what he means when he refers to the former Prime Minister, because from my perspective—as Salisbury’s Member of Parliament—I see that Wiltshire police have conducted their inquiries perfectly within the guidance set out by the College of Policing and are going where the evidence takes them?

Sir Gerald Howarth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I was about to say that, such is the weight of evidence against the police operations, that time will not permit me to make more than a passing reference to them. I am afraid that I disagree with his view of Chief Constable Veale of Wiltshire. The chief constable’s recent assertion—his bravado—was quite unwarranted. Sir Edward has been dead for 10 years, but I wish to leave that point there, because I think others may well deal with it, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will be able in due course to make his case in defence of Chief Constable Veale.
These people have lost income. Paul Gambaccini told the Home Affairs Committee that he had lost £200,000 in income and payment of legal fees following his suspension from the BBC and other broadcasters. Harvey Proctor lost his income following his sack by the Duke and Duchess of Rutland, to whom he had acted as secretary. That sacking was largely at the behest of Leicestershire’s constabulary and social services. Loss of the job meant he also lost his home on the duke’s estate and he is now living in an outhouse with no running water and no lavatory facilities. That is the hard effect of this travesty.

In addition, the distress caused is difficult to imagine. During the investigation conducted under Operation Midland and Operation Vincente, Lord Brittan died and Lord Bramall’s wife died, neither of them knowing that the investigations had both been wound up. In the case of Lord Brittan, who died in January 2015, it was not only years before the Metropolitan police told Lady Brittan that the Operation Midland case had been dropped, and only when they were asked by her lawyers to verify a report in The Independent on Sunday did the Metropolitan police say that they would not have proceeded.

However, the distress was not confined to that aspect of the case. Lady Brittan endured the indignity of the search of her property. As she told me, 10 to 20 officers invaded the house. She said it was like witnessing a robbery of one’s treasured possessions, including letters of condolence and photographs, without ever being told why. The police were insensitive to her circumstances and never told her that she had certain rights during a search. In her Yorkshire house, the police asked if there was any newly turned earth in the garden, again without saying why.

As Lady Brittan says, while it was ordinary police officers who were instructed to undertake the searches, responsibility for the control of this operation rests with senior police officers, whose insensitivity and incompetence has been revealed.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that what appears to be at work here is the most extraordinary want of any form of judgment and balance? And would he care to comment on why there is a pattern running through all this activity of an absolute inability of the police to think for themselves?

Sir Gerald Howarth: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, and in looking at all of this I have tried to work out precisely what motivated the police. As I will say in a moment, they seem completely bereft of any common sense. However, if he will forgive me, I will try to address that point later on.

In respect of the searches of Lady Brittan’s home, one sergeant told her, “Thank goodness we are only lowly cogs in this investigation”.

Let me turn to my long-standing friend, Harvey Proctor. It took him 28 years to rebuild his life following his conviction in 1987 for a sexual offence, which is no longer an offence and which of course cost him his place in this House. He shunned the public spotlight and became a very private citizen until, out of the blue, his home was raided by police, who spent 15 hours searching, removed papers and possessions, and told him that he was accused of being involved in historical child sex abuse. It took the police a further two months to accuse him of being a child sexual murderer, a child rapist and an abuser of children. Those were the wild allegations of one fantasist known only to the public as Nick.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I think my hon. Friend is coming to a very important area. Does he agree that we must be very careful about talking about victims, because surely what we are talking about are complainants? There are no victims until allegations have been proven.

Sir Gerald Howarth: My hon. Friend makes a very important point and it is one that I intend to address in some detail in a moment.

Not content with making these serious charges against Harvey, Nick suggested that there was a paedophile ring operating in Westminster, accusations that the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson), who is the deputy leader of the Labour party, was keen to exploit as a Tory scandal and for which he should now offer a full and unreserved apology.

Harvey had staying with him in his house a couple and their newborn child. He was told two weeks before the search of his house by the Metropolitan police that that child should be removed for their own safety, and secret sessions between the Leicestershire police, Leicestershire social services and the duke’s representatives were convened when pressure was placed on the duke and duchess to sack Harvey from his employment after the search of his house. Leicestershire constabulary and the Met passed responsibility for this issue to each other, backwards and forwards, but it happened.

What are the charges against the Metropolitan police and the other forces involved? First, it is that they adopted a policy that the accusations were, in the words of Superintendent Kenny McDonald, “credible and true”. Gone was any pretence of old-fashioned policing—looking dispassionately at the evidence and seeing where it leads.

This is where we are assisted by the excellent report produced by Sir Richard Henriques, a former High Court judge; admittedly, that report was at the specific request of Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police. What Sir Richard found was that the chief constable of Norfolk, Simon Bailey, who I understand leads for the Association of Chief Police Officers on child protection and abuse investigation, produced guidance in November 2015 that insisted that the police adopt a policy that the accusations were, in the words of Superintendent Kenny McDonald, “credible and true”. Gone was any pretence of old-fashioned policing—looking dispassionately at the evidence and seeing where it leads.

He said:

“The police service”—please note the reference to the police service, not the police force—

“is the conduit that links the victim to the rest of the criminal justice system; there is a need to develop a relationship and rapport with a victim...in order to achieve the best evidence possible.”

That is the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham).
Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Does not that fundamentally undermine the bedrock of our justice system—that somebody is innocent until proved guilty?

Sir Gerald Howarth: My hon. Friend says “if they exist”; I am not saying they do not. I do not know, but what I do know—it is a fact—is that Sir Edward Heath is dead and cannot answer back.

Paul Gambaccini, whom I met yesterday, referred to the “bandwaggoner”—a person who hears about a complaint against a well-known personality and adds their own false complaint, possibly to make money. That motive should not be discounted in the consideration of these matters.

The third charge relates to the reliability of witnesses. Nick, the man upon whose evidence much of this monstrous submission was based, was dismissed by his mother, his stepmother, his ex-wife and his siblings as a fantasist. In their investigation, Northumbria constabulary must be ruthless in their analysis of why that man should have been free to make such deeply serious accusations against prominent figures when it would appear that little research was undertaken into his background. If his own mother denounced him, why did the police attach such credence to his claims? Of course, this is a man whose evidence was said to be “credible and true” by that chief superintendent. Did they not even think it was worth asking his relatives?

Fourthly, “victims” were constantly kept informed of progress on the case, but the alleged suspects remained in the dark throughout. That cannot be allowed to happen again.

Finally, why did the police abandon all notion of common sense? My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) made that point. At the time of the alleged offences committed by Lord Bramall, he would have had any number of senior officers around him. What attempt was made by the police to ask for their opinion? Or did the police prefer to believe an unknown witness over one with close knowledge of the suspect? The idea that he was cavorting in some orgy on that most solemn of days, Remembrance Day, is not only absurd but an insult to a decorated war hero.

At my surgery on Saturday, I met Lieutenant Colonel Ben Herman. He is an ex-Royal Marine and a former equerry to His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh. He lives in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), who cannot be here because he is attending a Committee. Lieutenant Colonel Herman was charged after being kept on bail for more than two years, but was acquitted after 15 minutes’ consideration by the jury. It was his contention that the attraction of his case was the opportunity to land a big fish. Lowly police officers carrying out dull work—except, I suppose, when they were infiltrating subversive groups and fathering children by the women they were supposed to be investigating—were salivating at the prospect of nailing a servant of the royal household. How far did such sentiments permeate the minds of those engaged on Operations Midland, Vincente and Yewtree?

These investigations constituted a grotesque and inexcusable failure by the Metropolitan police. Sir Bernard has accepted that there was failure, but who has been reprimanded or even sacked for the damage done to the individuals concerned and to the reputation of the Metropolitan police? We must await the investigation of the Independent Police Complaints Commission with interest. I hope it will be expedited. On the other hand, the behaviour of those facing these dreadful accusations...
[Sir Gerald Howarth]

has been extraordinarily dignified. My noble Friend Lord

Dear, a former chief constable of West Midlands police, said that in contrast to the dignity shown by Lord Bramall,

“the police investigation lurched from over-reaction to torpidity.”

I will outline what is needed. First, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe should ensure that those responsible for authorising payments to the real victims of this witch hunt—the people whose reputations his force has shredded and to whom immense distress has been caused—are provided with that authority before he leaves office early in the new year. I spoke briefly to him last night to let

him know I was initiating this debate. He must sign the

documents before he leaves. Forcing these people to go to
court to seek compensation would simply add insult to injury. However, in the absence of an agreed arrangement, that is what they may be obliged to do. As Paul Gambaccini said to me yesterday, no man should acquiesce in his own annihilation.

Secondly, the Henries recommendations must be implemented urgently. In particular, the requirement that those making claims of historical child abuse be regarded as victims and not complainants must be reversed forthwith, as it overturns the centuries-old principle of the burden of proof. In an article in The Guardian on 10 February this year, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe said—kindly sent it over to me this morning:

“The public should be clear that officers do not believe unconditionally what anyone tells them.”

But that flatly contradicts Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary’s ruling, which I mentioned earlier, that the presumption should be that the victim is always believed.

Thirdly, the recommendation of anonymity before charge should also be implemented without delay. The Home Affairs Committee’s report on police bail, published on 17 March last year, was clear about that. It concluded:

“Newspapers and the media are prohibited from revealing the name of a person who is the victim of an alleged sexual offence. We recommend that the same right to anonymity should also apply to the person accused of the crime, unless and until they are charged with an offence.”

In support of that recommendation, the Committee referred to its predecessor Committee’s inquiry into the Sexual Offences Bill 2003, which “called for anonymity for the defendant in such cases, because it felt sexual offences were ‘within an entirely different order’ to most other crimes, carrying a particular and very damaging stigma.”

I agree and, I am pleased to say, so does Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe. At least we have found common ground there.

Fourthly, I am disappointed that the Home Secretary feels unable to intervene in any aspect of this saga. In response to my call for the full Henries report to be published and for compensation to be paid, she wrote to me last month to say that:

“The police are operationally independent of Government, and so any arrangements in connection with the publication of Sir Richard’s report are a matter for the Commissioner of the Police for the Metropolis to consider and address.”

I do not agree. These are not operational matters. I regard them as matters pertaining to public policy, which cannot simply be passed back to the commissioner. Indeed, I would argue that it is unfair on him to leave him with the sole responsibility. I gather that, as far as compensation is concerned, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe has to seek authority from other unspecified people, but I hope that the Minister will be able to confirm to me that that will be forthcoming shortly.

I have not been able to contact the Mayor of London, although his office phoned me about five minutes before this debate started. Again, I understand that he does not feel that this is a matter for him because it is an operational matter. I fundamentally disagree. This is a matter of public policy. There has been a serious miscarriage of justice, and Ministers cannot simply stand by and wash their hands of it. They may not agree with my view, but they should at least have a view. I think that the full Henries report should be published. There is, for example, an entire chapter on Paul Gambaccini, which has not seen the light of day; it has been redacted in its entirety.

For all those people, this has been a harrowing experience exacerbated by insensitivity combined with incompetence on the part of the police. Lord Brittan went to his grave not knowing that the allegations in Operation Vincente had been dismissed. Lady Bramall went to hers not knowing that her husband had also been exonerated. Harvey Proctor said at his press conference on 25 August 2015:

“This whole catalogue of events has wrecked my life, lost me my job and demolished 28 years of my rehabilitation since 1987.”

Not a single police officer has been reprimanded, let alone sacked. Responsibility for this scandalous failure must lie with Sir Bernard and his senior officers. Either they knew what was being done in their name, which clearly renders them culpable, or they did not, which begs the question why they were not closely updated on cases involving multiple child murders and child sexual abuse, allegedly perpetrated by a Westminster ring involving a former Prime Minister and other public figures. In the case of Sir Cliff Richard, we know that the South Yorkshire police disgracefully conspired with the BBC to film the raid on his home.

However, there is one police officer who deserves praise. Detective Chief Inspector Paul Settle is the senior officer responsible for Operation Vincente into the allegation of rape made against Lord Brittan by a woman known only as Jane. In September 2013, he decided that the investigation should not proceed any further, and concluded that any action against Lord Brittan would be grossly disproportionate and would not have a legal basis. As he told the Home Affairs Select Committee, as a result of the hon. Member for West Bromwich East piling pressure on the Met, a hurried review of DCI Settle’s decision was carried out by another officer, who failed to look at all the documents and, in particular, did not look at DCI Settle’s decision log, a document he described as “an intrinsic and fundamental part of all major investigations.”

That provides further evidence that culpability for this matter resides at the top of the Met.

For acting with probity, DCI Settle was ordered by his line manager, Detective Superintendent Gray, to have nothing more to do with the case. Not only was he brushed aside and not only was he hitherto distinguished career blighted but he was referred to the Independent Police Complaints Commission for allegedly leaking information to the media. As one police source is reported to have told the Daily Telegraph:

“He was the only detective who spoke out against the witch hunt of VIPs and he is being punished for his honesty.”

It seems that he is being sacrificed by his superiors.
Finally, I say to those who might be tempted to think that I am concerned with those in high places suffering injustice only because they are people I know in one way or another that I am not. If that is how the police treat those in high places, what confidence can the ordinary man in the street have that he will receive fair and impartial treatment from the police?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. We have about 36 minutes until the wind-ups begin, and six people who have indicated that they wish to speak, so they have about six minutes each.

2.55 pm

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I thank the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) for securing this debate, which gives us the opportunity to examine policing in relation to one of the most serious crimes of our age. At the outset, I should say that I have spent a good number of years campaigning on child sexual abuse, and I have met many survivors of sexual abuse. Furthermore, my second wife was sexually abused as a child, as is publicly known, so I know that it destroys lives.

I have an additional perspective on this matter: I have been the subject of accusations of sexual abuse, which were investigated by the police. I knew the allegations were nonsense; and it was a very distressing time as I had to wait many months before the Crown Prosecution Service put me out of my misery and dropped the case because there was no evidence. It also cost me a considerable amount of money—the hon. Gentleman talked about that issue. I think I can therefore contribute an understanding not just of the seriousness of this type of crime but of the trauma that innocent people are put through when malicious allegations are made against them.

I have also been critical of the police for the mistakes they have made in investigating sexual abuse. I have had good reason to do so on behalf of my constituents, especially in relation to the Rochdale grooming scandal. Greater Manchester police eventually apologised for that.

I have also read the Henriques report on Operation Midland. It is clear that that investigation also suffered from chronic failures, albeit of a different kind. The pendulum swung from a situation in which the police showed little interest in investigating the crime to one in which, haunted by failures of the past, they became over-zealous and they over-reached. Neither approach is acceptable, and it is right that scrutiny and criticism have followed.

I am pleased that the Home Secretary has announced that the police should have a licence to investigate child abuse to ensure consistent standards and to prevent officers from being forced to take on roles for which they are not prepared. However, I also believe that the Home Secretary should introduce mandatory reporting of abuse, although that is perhaps a debate for another day. As important as it is to scrutinise Operation Midland, we cannot give the public the impression that we are here to protect our own or to make the police think twice before investigating any current or former Members of this House. The police must act without fear or favour. They should not be intimidated or disparaged from carrying out investigations into MPs. It is just as important that justice is applied to a Home Secretary as it is that it is applied to a homeless person.

We must remember that we have had Government Whips such as Tim Fortescue boasting that they could cover up scandals involving MPs and small boys; we have had papers from the head of M15 sent to the Cabinet Secretary under Margaret Thatcher warning that Peter Morrison MP had a penchant for small boys; and we have had significant allegations of child abuse by Lord Janner. There are currently 29 cases before the Independent Police Complaints Commission involving allegations of the police covering up child sexual offences from the ’70s to 2005. The IPCC has admitted that some of those allegations concern Members of Parliament—people who have been Members of Parliament. I could go on with other examples. It is clear that Sir Ian Horobin, the MP who was jailed for child sexual abuse in 1962, was certainly not the only person in this House guilty of that type of crime.

But that is the wider context. I would like now to focus on my personal understanding of the failings in relation to Operation Midland. After I wrote a book on Cyril Smith and the abuse that he meted out, I was inundated with correspondence making all sorts of allegations about other politicians, including Leon Brittan. I looked into those allegations, but I could find no evidence to suggest that he had done anything criminal. Furthermore, my office spoke to the person known as Nick, who was a key source of evidence during Operation Midland. The feedback that I received was that he had been instructed by the now defunct news website Exaro not to provide details to me about VIP abusers. Nick was clearly a very damaged individual who was struggling to cope, and I do believe that he had been abused. I just did not know by who.

I found all that a depressing tale and decided not to do anything with Nick’s testimony. However, I assumed that the Metropolitan police would not rely on one victim and that there were surely others. It now appears that that was not the case, and it was obviously a mistake to rely on so much from just one person. That said, I will not join in the calls to have Nick prosecuted for perverting the course of justice. I do not think that would be wise. There is some irony, in that we do not have to go too far back in modern history to find a Director of Public Prosecutions stating that it was not in the public interest to prosecute Cyril Smith MP for child abuse, or Victor Montagu MP, who admitted abusing a boy for nearly two years, and yet there are now calls for a survivor of abuse to be prosecuted. I certainly do not think it is in the public interest to prosecute Nick.

The law is messy and imperfect. Child abuse is a difficult crime to investigate, and a combination of disinterest and inadequate police skills over recent decades has resulted in far too many people getting away with a very serious crime. On occasion, that has also resulted in the wrong people being accused, with a lot of unnecessary hurt caused as a result. Finally, the ongoing football scandal shows that we have been far too slow to act. We must be more vigilant about powerful people abusing children.
Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I am grateful to be called to speak. Mr Streeter, and I am very pleased to be able to make a short contribution to this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth). Everyone knows him to be a very good man, but it takes courage and determination to raise this sort of matter. I warmly support everything that he said.

The cases in question have created widespread concern about how the Metropolitan police and other forces have handled high-profile cases involving serious accusations of criminal offences allegedly committed by some of the leaders of our country. There is the apparently ongoing, astonishing case of our former colleague and Prime Minister, Sir Edward Heath. So far, £700,000 has been spent on Operation Conifer, which is investigating the allegations against him. Some of the original allegations apparently included those of satanic rituals. Those complaints have since been dismissed, but they are illustrative of the bizarre extent of the allegations. The chief constable for Wiltshire has responded to the inevitable questions about why the police are wasting so much money on claims against a man who died more than 10 years ago and cannot answer back by defiantly affirming that he would not be “buckling under pressure to not investigate or to conclude the investigation prematurely.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot mentioned the raid on the home of Lord and Lady Brittan. I should declare an interest: both Lord and Lady Brittan are very old friends of mine. My hon. Friend also mentioned the horrific indifference of the police officers involved. Furthermore, I remind the House of what happened to Lord Bramall. His house was raided by a 20-strong search team in a blaze of publicity, with police cars parked in the pub car park, advertising to the world what they were about. What an unspeakable way in which to treat a second world war veteran, let alone a former Chief of the Defence Staff of utmost probity. That calls the police’s whole sense of proportion and loss of judgment into question.

I knew Harvey Proctor slightly. He had been in the House for four years when I was first elected in 1983. We were not political soulmates, but I was one of those Members of Parliament proud to rally around to help him to set up his shop in Richmond following his conviction in 1987, which resulted in his leaving the House. I was heartened to see that, once again, people such as Matthew Parris and Michael Portillo were rallying around to support the public-spirited initiative of Iain Dale to raise money for Mr Proctor, who in my judgment has been unspeakably treated. The effort raised some £11,140, including many small contributions from ordinary people disgusted by what they had read about the handling of the case by the Metropolitan police.

Another case concerns a former fire officer in Dorset, David Bryant, who is 66 years old and has received commendations for gallantry. He spent almost three years behind bars for a crime that he did not commit, solely on the evidence of a man with a history of mental illness. Danny Day, now aged 53, had gone to the police in 2012 claiming that he had been raped by Mr Bryant and another firefighter, who is now dead, at the fire station in Christchurch on a single unspecified date at some time between 1976 and 1978. Mr Day said he was aged about 14 at the time of the alleged attack.

Mr Bryant, who the court heard was of “impeccable character” and had no previous criminal record, was convicted in 2013. Initially, he was sentenced to six years in jail, later increased to eight. Mr Day, who waived his right to anonymity in a series of newspaper interviews after the conviction, was finally exposed as a liar after detective work by a brave Mrs Bryant and a team of lawyers and private investigators who had been so horrified by the conviction that they had agreed to work on the case for free. Mr Justice Singly, hearing the case with Lord Justice Leveson and one other senior judge, said that other fresh material before the court included information that “over a period from 2000 to 2010 the complainant in this case had to seek medical attention from his GP in relation to what can only be described as his being a chronic liar”.

David Bryant said:

“What happened to me must never be allowed to happen again. Being wrongly imprisoned as an innocent man is a living hell and something I wouldn’t wish upon my worst enemy.”

To conclude, there are terrible cases that must be dealt with—I agree with the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk)—but what comes through in the case of Harvey Proctor and others is the monstrous treatment of an innocent man, who lost his livelihood, his way of life and everything else that he had strenuously worked for to re-establish his good name. The Metropolitan police must put him back and recompense him for that terrible evil. A monstrous injustice has been done and is too regularly done. I beg the Home Secretary and others in some way to ensure that the police exercise a proper sense of proportion, common sense and good judgment when dealing with such difficult cases.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I extend my thanks to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) for securing the debate.

As more and more allegations of historical child sex abuse come to light, more focus is inevitably placed on how our police forces handle such important matters. We have had Operation Yewtree into the Jimmy Savile cases; the umbrella inquiry, Operation Fairbank, which investigated politicians and other high-profile public figures; and Operation Midland, which is our particular focus today. Operation Midland was closed without any charges being brought.

As is now agreed, the allegations of historical child sex abuse that gave rise to Operation Midland were mishandled at best and shambolic at worst. In the event, worryingly, 40 areas of concern were identified in Sir Richard Henriques’s report, including the “automatic believing” of the allegations of the person known as Nick, whom we have heard about. Nick, the principal complainant, was treated as being “credible and true”, to use Henriques’s words.

Although there can be no further doubt that Operation Midland is an example of investigation at its worst of most serious allegations, and that lessons must be learnt so that such allegations in the future are properly and fully investigated, it is also essential that those who allege they have suffered sexual abuse always remain at
the heart of police investigations and feel able, supported and confident about coming forward to report crimes in future.

Although the Henriques report spoke of police failings in automatically believing the complainant Nick, whose account and allegations contained inconsistencies that ought to have made investigators more sceptical and more questioning, he is only one person, and all future complainants should not be tarred with the same brush. False allegations of historical sexual abuse, or any sexual abuse, are not seriously believed by many people to be widespread, and we must remember that.

However, concerns about this entire unfortunate episode persist. There has been much criticism of the fact that only around 10% of the Henriques report will be published. What does that mean for full transparency in such a serious matter? The fact that its publication coincided with the day of the presidential election in America has also raised concerns about attempts to bury bad news, but bad news such as this is like Banquo’s ghost; it will appear at the most inopportune moments to haunt those concerned. This attempt to bury bad news does not reassure the public or gratify those who feel they were unfairly targeted as part of Operation Midland.

Scotland Yard has been accused of attempting to limit the damage to its reputation by heavily redacting the report. The main complainant who gave rise to Operation Midland has now been dismissed, as we have heard, as a fantasist who faces potential charges. We must also remember that, by their very nature, allegations of historical sex abuse can be extremely challenging to investigate and very difficult to prove in court. Amid all the criticism, we need to remember that the police have an extremely difficult task. If they were not to be seen to investigate such allegations, they could be accused of being conflicted over investigating establishment figures. Clearly, that would lead to a loss of public confidence.

Investigating in a heavy-handed and gung-ho all-guns-blazing procedure is not appropriate, either. A balance must be struck that most people would agree was not struck in Operation Midland. That should be a cause of great concern to us all. It is a concern that there should not be and must not be any negative implications for how such allegations are treated in future. It is a concern that the police learn the lessons and investigate all such allegations in future without fear or favour and go wherever their investigations take them. It is a concern that victims of such abuse are not dismissed out of hand and have confidence that allegations will be fully and properly investigated. It is a concern that the public must feel that establishment figures will be fully investigated properly and transparently when such allegations are made against them in future, in the same way as such allegations should be investigated against any ordinary person. Those are important points, as more allegations of historical sex abuse emerge from the world of football as we speak.

Child sex abuse is the dirty little secret that is slowly exposing itself more and more as more people find the courage to come forward. We need to treat such allegations with proper care and attention and investigate them correctly. We owe that to every single person who has lived through such horrific abuse. It is important that no one is seen to be above the law, and no matter how historical the allegations are, they must be subject to full analysis. When there is sufficient evidence, those who are found to be guilty must be punished.

Mistakes in Operation Midland should serve warning of the importance of getting this right for both alleged victims and alleged abusers. It should not and must not be used as a barrier or a reason to automatically disbelieve future allegations. We need to get this right. I hope that today the Minister will reassure us that the Government are placing a strong emphasis on making sure they get this right in future.

3.14 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): We all bring prejudices into this place. The greatest prejudice that perhaps we all share is one of revulsion at the idea of child sexual exploitation, but when it affects an individual we know or revere, our prejudice is to immediately assume they are innocent. That was the case, in my circumstances, with Field Marshal Lord Bramall. He is an individual who, in my regiment, is revered, with a semi-godlike status. The whole family of the regiment were horrified that he should have been accused in such a way, and we rejoice that all the effects of the accusation have been removed from his character. However, we remain demanding of answers in this case.

Of course the great and the powerful should be investigated when allegations are made, just as allegations against anyone should be investigated, but it is how we investigate that matters. The Henriques report has outlined an appalling catalogue of errors in all the cases that hon. Members have mentioned in this debate. In the case of Lord Bramall, the report says that it was wrong to raid his home based on the testimony of a single complainant since dismissed, as hon. Members have said, as a fantasist. I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) about the number of officers, where they parked and the other factors involved in the case. The Henriques report says that it was entirely wrong to wait 10 months for the investigation to be dropped. In addition, Henriques questions the police tactics in obtaining search warrants for Lord Brittan’s and Harvey Proctor’s homes.

We have to ask who in the team conducting the search on Lord Bramall’s home questioned the ethics of entering the house of someone in their 90s in the way that they did. This was someone nursing his terminally ill wife. The police spent 10 hours in that house, many of them dressed in forensic suits, causing great distress to the ailing Lady Bramall. They took personal items out of the house and did not return them for a very long time. What kind of appalling groupthink existed in that team? I understand the medical term for it is cognitive dissonance. We have seen this in hospitals that have declined to see terrible figures on mortality. We have seen it in other organisations. I suggest it was prevalent in the Operation Midland team. Was there—is there—an adequate whistleblowing system that would have allowed someone properly to raise this?

I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth), who secured this debate. He made an excellent speech. In many of our public services, including our most secret intelligence services, there is a system for people to raise concerns, but the system clearly failed in the case of Operation Midland.
[Richard Benyon]

The hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) rightly talked about the pendulum swinging. The police were appalled at the attacks that had been made on them for their failure in the Savile case and they swung the other way. But did anyone lose their job over the treatment of people like Lord Bramall, Lord Brittan and Harvey Proctor? Such high-profile people who are still alive are articulate and able to make a powerful case on their own behalf, whatever the privations they have suffered as a result.

Sir Nicholas Soames: On that point, I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent speech. Someone was in charge of this. Someone was providing the leadership for the teams and exerting the judgment, issuing instructions and orders, and yet no one has been held accountable for the dreadful way in which it was being done.

Richard Benyon: As my right hon. Friend’s grandfather might have said, who was in charge of the clattering train? But it is not just about famous and well-known people. What about the teacher, the carer, the social worker, the fireman who are treated in this way? Blame lies not just with the misguided officers behind so many of the failures in Operation Midland. The climate was perpetrated by—I will name him—the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) and others, who fostered a conspiracy theory culture around many of the investigations into the individuals.

The hon. Member for Rochdale was right to mention the loathsome people behind Exaro, the news website that put innocent people’s names in the public domain. It is hard to credit that the initial failures of the search and the delay in announcing that the inquiry had been dropped were compounded by the official letter Lord Bramall received, which was very curtish in its conclusions. It just said there was insufficient evidence to merit continuing the inquiry, and that further investigation could take place if more information came out. That was sent to a 90-year-old war veteran, with his dying wife in the house. What kind of mindset prevailed in the organisation?

I want never again to be ashamed of any action taken by the police force in any part of the country. I revere the police and firmly agree that they have a most difficult job; but the way things were done in the case I have outlined is deeply worrying to all of us who believe that fairness before the law is this country’s greatest virtue. I hope that the Minister will understand the strength of feeling that means he needs to hold the police force to account.

3.20 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) spoke, is someone for whom I have the highest regard. It is unforgivable that his wife died without knowing that the accusations against her husband were false. The way the raid on his home was conducted was a disgrace. The late Lord Brittan was a fine Home Secretary and a great European Commissioner. When I heard of the allegations against him I just could not believe them. It is, again, unforgivable that he died without knowing he had been cleared of the allegations.

However, I want to focus in my speech mainly on Harvey Proctor. He was the Member of Parliament for Basildon, first, and then Billericay, from 1979 to 1987. I was elected for Basildon in 1983 and Harvey Proctor then became the MP for Billericay. As a newly elected Member of Parliament, elected under extraordinary circumstances to a House that was very different from the way it is today, I was grateful for all the help and support that he gave me. I speak as I find; he was perhaps the least materialistic Conservative colleague I have ever known. His reputation as an assiduous constituency Member still holds good today. It was a shock when, in May 1987, in the first week of the general election campaign, there was a trial and Harvey was convicted of an act of gross indecency; he was fined £1,450. Suddenly, in the first week of the campaign, there was a new Conservative candidate, the late Teresa Gorman.

I think that Harvey paid a heavy price for what he was found guilty of in 1987. I have been in correspondence with the Prime Minister, when she was Home Secretary, to see what could be done about the charges. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex for what he and others did to try to rescue Harvey’s career, which had been destroyed. So it was a shock when, in March 2015, Harvey’s home at Belvoir was raided. Between 1987 and 2015 I had rather lost contact with him and it was after some years, at a caravan rally at the Duke of Rutland’s estate, where he was the manager, that we met. I was reminded—we are all busy people and we forget about things—how his life had been destroyed; he was haunted by what had happened in 1987. Harvey was, of course, accused of rape and murder, and has been acquitted.

Sir Richard’s report, which is excellent, makes 40 recommendations. I want to end by saying that I am tiring of Ministers responding to debates with what amounts to saying they cannot do anything. In 1983 they could do something, so how is it that 33 years later Ministers seem to be so powerless? Surely a word could be said, or a message could be sent. As far as Harvey Proctor is concerned, his life has been destroyed; he is more than entitled to compensation, as indeed the other victims should be.

3.25 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): Early one morning in March 2015, one of my constituents opened the front door of her home in Wensleydale to find a group of police officers standing there, with a warrant to search her house. Having lost her husband of 35 years just weeks before, she watched while the officers upturned every inch of the home they had shared. She told me it was “like seeing your house burgled in front of your eyes”.

Sir Richard’s report, which is excellent, makes 40 recommendations. I want to end by saying that I am tiring of Ministers responding to debates with what amounts to saying they cannot do anything. In 1983 they could do something, so how is it that 33 years later Ministers seem to be so powerless? Surely a word could be said, or a message could be sent. As far as Harvey Proctor is concerned, his life has been destroyed; he is more than entitled to compensation, as indeed the other victims should be.
My constituent is Lady Diana Brittan, and her husband Leon was once my constituency’s representative in this House.

By any measure, Leon Brittan was a great man. Our nation’s youngest Home Secretary since Churchill, he helped to guide the country through the long night of the miners’ strikes. As Secretary of State for Trade, he played an instrumental role in creating the World Trade Organisation and, as Britain’s EU Commissioner, he won the nickname “Bulldozer” for his immovable commitment to UK interests. In pursuing what he knew to be right, regardless of who told him otherwise, Leon soon proved that he had, in spirit at least, been a son of Yorkshire all along.

However, in the last year of his life, when he was dying from cancer, he received a phone call from the Metropolitan Police. He was told that he was to be investigated for an allegation of rape some 48 years old. The phone call was made despite the fact that the officer in charge of the case described the investigation as “grossly disproportionate”, and despite the fact that, as the Director of Public Prosecutions would later confirm, the case “at no time” met the necessary threshold for a realistic prospect of conviction. No one is above the law. It is of course right that the police should confirm, the case “at no time” met the necessary threshold for a realistic prospect of conviction. No one is above the law. It is of course right that the police should vigorously pursue allegations of criminality. However, in the case of my constituent it is clear that the Metropolitan police committed grave errors. As the Select Committee on Home Affairs said, the police acted in fear of “media criticism and public cynicism”.

That is not a proper basis for police operations. The pursuit of justice is not an exercise in public relations.

Commissioner Hogan-Howe is to be commended for initiating the excellent independent Henriques review of the Met’s performance. However, the report is damning and should be acted on. Now is the time to review the police’s approach to investigating allegations of sexual offending. In the case of my constituent, there were serious shortcomings in the way that the Metropolitan police interacted with the media. Our laws rightly preserve the anonymity of the accused for sexual offences. Yet for the accused, our protections have repeatedly proved inadequate. Current police practice of confirming to the media the age and location of suspects is clearly incompatible with the police policy that suspects should maintain their anonymity until charged. For Leon, whose long years of public service made him easily identifiable, anonymity was lost well before one of his cases had even been, with shocking results. Lady Brittan, who was a dedicated magistrate, described to me how she and Leon, who was then in the late stages of cancer, were chased down narrow Yorkshire lanes by photographers and how their daughters fended off journalists outside their home. I appreciate the delicate arguments involved in considering statutory pre-charge protection of anonymity, but the failings of Operation Midland provide a compelling case for review.

Lastly, and most unforgivably of all, the police failed to inform the Brittan family that they were no longer pursuing their investigations. They found the time to inform the complainant, but it was not until nine months later that Lady Brittan read in a newspaper what she had known all along: that her husband had done nothing wrong. That delay meant that Leon died without ever seeing his innocence confirmed. It is shameful that the man who led our police force through one of its most challenging periods found himself so poorly repaid at its hands.

In conclusion, I have no doubt that if Leon, with his fierce intellect, had been standing in my place today, he would have made a far better case than I ever could. However, foremost in his mind would have been that the lessons must be learned, and learned properly. No one should ever suffer the injustice that he and his family have had to endure.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): If each of the Front Benchers aims for nine minutes, that will give Sir Gerald two minutes to respond. I call Richard Arkless.

3.30 pm

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Streeter. I will not attempt to take up any more time than I have been allocated; I am keen to hear what the other Front Benchers have to say. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) on bringing this sensitive and difficult topic to the Chamber. It is not easy to take the position that he has taken on this matter, and I recognise his bravery for doing so.

I will start by bucking the trend and praising the police—although obviously not in the context of Operation Midland. In my experience, the police in all four nations of these islands do a terrific job, and we should not forget that. This seems to be an isolated incident, and it is right that we express concern about it and try to tackle it.

Like most Members in the Chamber, I believe two things in this respect. First, I believe in the presumption of innocence. I am a lawyer, so for me that is a cornerstone of a civil society and the rule of law and it ought never to be discarded. Secondly, I believe that child sexual abuse is the most heinous crime that human beings have ever committed against other human beings. It is a heinous crime not only to be committed, but for someone to be accused of if they have not committed it. We should remember both those things. It is the only crime for which I could possibly justify reinstatement of the death penalty—clearly not in cases where people are innocent, but it is the most appallingly disgusting crime.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in the case of Cliff Richard, for example, the presumption of innocence was done away with when the search of his house and the reason for it was broadcast live on television with the connivance of the police?
Richard Arkless: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I have just said that I appreciate that child sexual abuse is the most heinous crime not only to commit but to be accused of, and I have certain personal sympathies with Mr Richard’s position that there should be anonymity before charge. That debate is ongoing, and it is right that we have it. I do not disagree at all that child sexual abuse is the most heinous and appalling crime to be convicted of, and I have sympathy with anyone who has ever found themselves in that position.

I suppose the public will watch debates such as this and think to themselves, “What on earth was going on 20, 30 or 40 years ago?” The allegations made in the context of Operation Midland could not be proven—rightly so, it seems—but we have had other high-profile cases such as Savile, and we now have allegations involving football players and clubs. It seems that when two or three victims, or complainants, have the courage to come forward, that unlocks a Pandora’s box that no one thought was there. Although the points that the hon. Member for Aldershot made are steeped in sense, the danger of this debate is that we somehow appear to be protecting our friends and pals. If we do that, it will commit us to the protection of our friends and pals, or, if they do not come forward, we will never understand the scale of what seems to have happened in a time about which I quite frankly cannot understand what I have seen and heard over the past few years.

The hon. Gentleman made a fantastic and powerful speech, and I was struck by the recommendations that he made. I was interested in his points about 3 Hare Court chambers—which I used to work with, incidentally, so I trust its advice. I was quite perturbed and distressed by the words “if they exist”. Clearly, in Operation Midland, it was difficult to prove that Nick was telling the truth, but if we in this place start taking that attitude—“Do victims exist? Should these allegations be believed? Are they spurious?”—we will put a lid on people being brave enough to come forward and describe such allegations, so that we in society can face up to what people did years ago, which none of us would suggest we have any part in.

That is the main point that I wanted to make. I was going to comment on some other speeches—I have been impressed by all the speeches—but I am keen to hear what the other Front Benchers have to say. I conclude with a note of caution: although it is right that we have this debate, we should be very clear and careful about the message that we send out. Presumption of innocence is one thing, but I would rather have a debate about the thousands of people all over these islands who have been sexually abused—not by the gentlemen investigated by Operation Midland, granted—and who never had the courage to come forward. I would like those people to come forward so they can finally get justice. That is what I would prefer to be talking about.

3.35 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): May I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) and all other Members on their passionate and interesting speeches? May I also say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter?

The report’s findings are extremely serious. They relate to the poor conduct of the police investigation and the breach of the police’s own guidelines on the anonymity of suspects, which have caused the Met to be in crisis. However, people’s focus is changing, and there now appears to be more attention on the credibility of rape and sexual assault victims. There is no evidence in the report to support a blanket change in policy for the treatment of all victims, which would run counter to all the evidence and the positions of all stakeholders.

Rape Crisis England and Wales says:

“The vast majority of survivors choose not to report to the police. One significant reason...is the fear of not being believed.”

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children carried out a series of focus groups with victims of Jimmy Savile to identify common themes that prevented those victims from reporting their abuse to the police at the time and to explore how the police could improve their management of the reporting process and subsequent interviews and contacts. In all those groups, a key reason victims gave for not disclosing abuse was their overwhelming belief that if they had done so, they would not have been believed. Those who did not report abuse cited feelings of shame, guilt and a fear of not being believed, as well as being intimidated by Jimmy Savile’s profile, as their reasons for not telling anyone. Status and position must not be a shield against investigation. We have heard a lot about loss of income and livelihoods. If just one case is proven, that is one child’s childhood that has been taken.

The Met has made very serious errors. The detail of the Henriques report should be used to strengthen police procedures for both investigation and the treatment of suspects. It cannot and must not be used to downgrade the seriousness of allegations of rape or sexual assault—crimes that are already woefully under-reported and have low conviction rates. Victims fearing that they will be doubted only serves to prevent reporting and to degrade those victims. There must be no move backwards by the police to make matters even worse. There must be no return to the abysmal treatment of victims or lack of seriousness in investigations, or to the police denigrating victims or denying them their rights.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Thank you, The Minister now has plenty of time to respond. I call Brandon Lewis.

3.39 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter, especially as you have effectively encouraged colleagues to intervene on me. Thank you for that.

As others have done, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) on securing this debate, and I thank him and others for the points that they have raised about this serious matter. I am grateful to all hon. Members for the quality of the debate, which shows Parliament at its very best. This subject is difficult and can be sensitive, but they have made their points clearly. I was going to say that if there is anything I do not touch on due to pressure of time, I will write to hon. Members. But I think we should have time to cover everything thanks to the tight speeches from the Opposition Front-Bench Members.

One of the difficulties with a debate such as this, as a couple of Members rightly mentioned, is getting the balance in the system, and understanding that there is a balance, that finds the correct line between making sure
that people can come forward as complainants or victims—
there is an issue about the definition of victims, which
was raised by hon. Friends and is in the Henries
report—and judging that against the right of the
individual, ensuring that we have a system in which people have
the freedom and confidence to come forward to make
complaints in the first place.

One of the things the police force should be proud
of—we should all be proud of this—is that we are
seeing a rise in recorded crime, with the two main causes
of that being the improvement in the quality of recording
and the number of people who have had the
confidence to come forward that was not there before.
We need to ensure that we retain that while we ensure that
the police and criminal justice system have the
credibility we all want them to have so that when an
allegation is brought forward that has no substance and
no finding, the police deal with it effectively and efficiently
as well. I will now come to that issue, which is at the
core of the debate.

I want to be clear at the outset that I am not going to
defend—or could I—the actions of the Metropolitan Police
Service in this case. We in Government share the
depth concerns that hon. Members have articulated so
clearly during the debate and those about the Metropolitan
police’s handling of non-recent sexual abuse allegations,
including Operation Midland. The Metropolitan police’s
credibility in dealing with child sexual exploitation generally
was highlighted and clearly shown to be well below the
standard it should be in the recent report by Her
Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary, which, to quote
Sir Tom Winso, is about the worst report that it has
ever written about any police force in the country.

We recognise the anguish felt by those who had their
reputations traduced by allegations that were subsequently
discovered to be unfounded, and I empathise with them.
To be unjustly accused of any crime, and, as the hon.
Members for Rochdale (Simon Danzuk) and for Dumfries
and Galloway (Richard Arkless) outlined, especially of
a crime such as this, is a terrible experience for any
individual. For that trauma to be exacerbated by police
failures and behaviour is an affront to our criminal
justice process and it should not happen.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, to his credit, was right to
ask Sir Richard Henriques to carry out the independent
review, but now he must stand up to the findings of that
review. He sheds a light on the errors made by his force in
carrying out the investigations. He has been frank in
acknowledging the failings of the Metropolitan Police
Service, and he, and I would say also his successor—I
hope that he will deal with this so that it is not an issue
for his successor to pick up next year—must not shy
away from a proper consideration and response to
Sir Richard’s recommendations or from taking all action
necessary to ensure that that litany of errors never
occurs again. I do mean all action necessary, and I will
come to the detail of that in a moment. It is imperative
that that is done without shying away from it at the
earliest opportunity.

The Metropolitan police are now consulting on the
recommendations with the National Police Chiefs Council,
the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime, the College
of Policing and statutory and voluntary partners in the
criminal justice system. I urge all parties involved in
that work to consider the recommendations swiftly and
decisively. They must learn the lessons from the failures.

Investigations into allegations around sexual offences
must be carried out professionally and appropriately for
both parties.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Having benefited
 hugely from particular kindness from both Field Marshal
Lord Bramall and Lord Brittan, may I suggest, as
colleagues have, that it is not just about learning lessons?
Those who were responsible for the disgraceful behaviour
on the day and the failure to follow up afterwards must be
identified.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point
that the review deals with. I will come specifically to
that in a moment.

This problem will not go away. Reports of child
sexual abuse are increasing year on year and our public
must have confidence in the system and that their police
force—whoever and wherever that is—will handle those
cases appropriately. However, again, that works both
ways. Members have noted the case of South Yorkshire
police and Sir Cliff Richard and how that was dealt
with. That is a great example of how to do it badly and
in a way that brings the entire police force into disrepute.

In order to wield the power, the police have to take
investigations forward properly and appropriately; they
have to understand the adage that with great power
comes responsibility. At what point could anyone take
the view that it is appropriate to carry out a raid with
the BBC or any media outlet in tow?

Sir Gerald Howarth: Like my hon. Friend, I find the
behaviour of the police and the BBC completely
inexplicable. What action has been taken? What reprimands
have there been? Has anyone been sacked? Can the
Minister tell us?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend may be aware that
there have been changes in the leadership at South
Yorkshire police, and work is being done there to look
at how they act. One of the other things we are doing to
ensure that action is taken more widely nationally is to
look at some issues that the Home Secretary has raised.
I will come to that in just a few moments.

Today I have spoken to the national policing lead,
Simon Bailey, who will be coming to see me before
Christmas to discuss the recommendations of the review
and the work that the police are doing more generally in
response to these serious issues. There is also the issue
of compensation for those who feel that they have been
poorly treated and who have seen their reputations
tarnished by the Metropolitan police force. As Members
have said, that is important.

Of course, as we have taken power from the centre
and moved it into police forces, it is for the Metropolitan
police to address any claims for compensation that arise
from the report’s findings and the general issues around
such cases, particularly the Harvey Proctor case. I am
sure that the House will agree that money cannot give
someone back their previously unsullied reputation;
nor can it give back the months, if not years, of anguish
and turmoil they will have suffered. It does however at
least provide some recognition of failure and responsibility,
and recompense for the cost that people have suffered.
That is something on which the police must focus. I am
seeing Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe next week, when I will
Brandon Lewis: I will come in a second to how the police should be dealing with those issues and going about their investigations, but, in terms of something happening whereby a member of the force sees something is wrong, in the first instance we should have a police service in which any member within it has the ability and confidence to come forward to the hierarchy of that service with a complaint and an outline of where things are going wrong. However, going beyond that and realising that we live in the real world and that in some hierarchical organisations, no matter how much we want it to be different, people feel that they cannot do that, in the Policing and Crime Bill that is going through Parliament we are giving more power to the Independent Police Complaints Commission so that it can take things up directly to give better protection to whistleblowers.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con) rose—

Brandon Lewis: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and then deal with both issues.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The Minister has rightly talked about maintaining the right balance, and he is making a powerful speech. However, if a member of a team going to search an individual’s house knows that what they are being asked to do is intrinsically wrong, what mechanisms exist in the police? I am mindful that the police have to maintain good order and discipline and cannot have people questioning them and going to the press, but there must be a hierarchical system in which an individual can say, “This is wrong. Something has to change.”

Brandon Lewis: I will come in a second to how the police are doing in that case. I assure the House that I will treat these matters with the utmost seriousness in raising them with him, and indeed in the conversations that I will have with the national police lead.

Richard Benyon: The Minister has rightly talked about maintaining the right balance, and he is making a powerful speech. However, if a member of a team going to search an individual’s house knows that what they are being asked to do is intrinsically wrong, what mechanisms exist in the police? I am mindful that the police have to maintain good order and discipline and cannot have people questioning them and going to the press, but there must be a hierarchical system in which an individual can say, “This is wrong. Something has to change.”
The evidence of the victim is just one part of an investigation; “believing” victims, or even referring to them as such at the point of disclosure when recording the crime, is opposed to complainants, should not and must not interfere with that. However, we need a system under which people who believe they are a victim feel confident and free enough to come forward in the first place. I am sure we all wish to see that continue. As with the rest of Sir Richard’s recommendations, I know that the Metropolitan police, the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime, the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs Council are looking closely and carefully at that, as they must, in order to respond fully.

Richard Benyon: Lord Dear made an important interjection on this issue in the other place. He said that the loss of the Police Staff College has had an impact on decision making and leadership. Does the Minister agree, and are there plans to put something like it in its place?

Brandon Lewis: I understand why Lord Dear made that point; I met him recently and he outlined his thoughts. However, we now have the College of Policing, which is working to make sure that we have the standards and the sharing of best practice in place. That is exactly what the college is there for.

The Home Secretary recently announced the development of a licence to practise for child sexual abuse investigators, as hon. Members outlined earlier. That will ensure that only qualified officers are carrying out those complex investigations and in the correct and appropriate way, and are hopefully dealing with some of the issues raised earlier. As a Government, we have done more than any other to lift the lid on what are heinous crimes. We have acknowledged the painful treatment endured by victims and by those wrongly accused. We have to make sure that we get that balance right. Similarly, we have to acknowledge the pain endured by those who have suffered sexual abuse and whose voices went unheard for such a long time. We saw that with the revelations relating to Jimmy Savile several years ago, and we are sadly seeing it again now with the appalling scale of allegations of abuse within football, as was noted earlier.

Child sexual abuse is a despicable crime. We have to do everything in our power not only to prevent it from happening but, where it happens, to root it out, deal with it and bring people to justice. We have been consistently clear that, where abuse has taken place, victims must be encouraged to come forward and have their allegations reviewed thoroughly and properly investigated so that people can be brought to justice. Again, that has to work both ways. To have confidence in the system, both the victims and the accused must have confidence that they will be treated with respect and will be brought to justice where appropriate.

In the case of Operation Midland, the Metropolitan police is clearly guilty of serious errors, as we heard earlier. Those failures must not be allowed to undo so much of the good work that we and they have done in recent years in giving that confidence to victims, survivors and the wider public to ensure that the police take these crimes seriously. Victims should—and increasingly do, as we have seen with the football scandal—feel able to come forward, to report abuse and to get the support that they need. In ensuring that that continues, we must not turn a blind eye to when the police get it wrong. In this instance they got it wrong, and they must stand up to that.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot for raising these important issues in such a powerful way, along with other right hon. and hon. Members. I hope that I have been able to assure hon. Members on the Government’s position; I will update them further following my meetings over the next week.

3.56 pm

Sir Gerald Howarth: I am most grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. It has been a seminal debate and has been very powerful and useful indeed.

I agree entirely with the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) that child abuse is the most heinous crime. That is why it is so serious for those who have been falsely accused; it is the most heinous crime. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) was also absolutely right that accusations must be investigated, and the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) said that the police must not be intimidated.

That is common ground among us all, but I think the hon. Member for Rochdale was right when he said that the pendulum had swung too far the other way. We know of the ghastly things that happened in his town; blind eyes were turned to the most heinous of crimes there, which must never be allowed to happen again. The issue is getting the balance right, which we have to do. I think that the guidance has to change. I cannot believe that we can carry on, as is required at the moment, having to believe people making these sometimes very wild accusations.

It is important that the point made by Sir Richard Henquises is taken on board—that some people in public life, particularly entertainers, are especially vulnerable to fantasists’ made-up accusations. In winnowing out all of these cases, it is important to recognise that some people may themselves be the target of fantasists who are interested simply in making money. I readily understand, as Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe said in his February article in The Guardian, that investigating these cases is exceptionally difficult. However, this debate has illustrated that the pendulum has gone too far, and that the police have to adopt a different standard. They must call people “complainants” and not “victims”, because otherwise they have prejudged the case at the outset.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Minister for his comments. I am delighted that he is meeting Chief Constable Bailey next week, because the issue is the nomenclature and the police’s approach to these claims. I particularly welcome his meeting next week with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, and his belief that compensation, particularly in the case of Harvey Proctor, must be resolved before Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe retires. That is a pre-condition, and I hope that my hon. Friend will reinforce that message and secure that result. I end by thanking all hon. Members for taking part in the debate, and by reminding them that this inquiry has cost the British taxpayer between £2.5 million and £3 million.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10 (6)).
Legacy Issues: Northern Ireland

[Nadine Dorries in the Chair]

4 pm

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered legacy issues arising from cases in Northern Ireland.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I think all of us agree that the Northern Ireland peace process has surpassed all expectations. Who could ever have dreamt 20 years ago that we would see in the Northern Ireland Administration both Democratic Unionist party Ministers and Sinn Féin Ministers? It is in everyone's interest that the peace process continues and endures.

I will say something about the legacy. I remind colleagues that 3,500 people were killed. Of those, 2,000 were killed by republican terrorists, 1,000 were killed by loyalist paramilitaries and 368 were killed by security forces. In total, 722 members of the security services were killed, which includes 477 serving British soldiers. The overwhelming majority of those deaths were fully investigated. The vast majority of wrongdoers were brought to justice. A very small number remain unsolved, and I understand the desire of some of those victims' relatives for closure. However, we have to be cautious. We simply cannot get away from the obvious fact that these events took place many, many years ago, and much of the evidence has disappeared.

In 2010, the Police Service of Northern Ireland set up the historical inquiries team to look at various cases. I understand that it completed investigations into 1,615 cases. It then set up the legacy investigation branch in January 2015 to look at the remaining 923 cases. Of those, 379 were republican cases, including 228 so-called on-the-runs, 230 were loyalists, and 283 were security forces. The active caseload is eight republican cases, one loyalist and five security forces. That means there are 911 cases outstanding. This could go on for many years. So far, the cost has been £33.2 million.

The cases are split pretty evenly between republicans, loyalists and security forces. However, I believe strongly that there cannot be any parity or moral equivalence between paramilitaries and terrorists and members of the armed forces. Those brave members of the armed forces were doing their duty, wearing the uniform of the Crown and working to keep the peace. We should not forget that the Army was originally called into Northern Ireland to restore order and to protect Catholics. The vast majority of those soldiers were young people, conducting themselves invariably to the highest possible professional standards and following the Yellow Book. The terrorists and paramilitaries, on the other hand, had one simple plan and aim in life: to kill and injure.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He clearly outlined the case for British soldiers who courageously, energetically and within the law did their job to an exemplary standard. Does he share my concern, as many people in Northern Ireland do, that at 60 or 70 years old, these men are thrown to the wolves? Does he think that should happen?

Sir Henry Bellingham: I will come to that in a moment. Dragging veterans—people in their 70s and 80s—out of their retirement to face trial when most of the evidence has long since disappeared is a fundamental breach of the military covenant.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): In that context, may I mention Corporal Major Dennis Hutchings? He served in the same squadron as a very dear friend of mine—an extremely brave soldier. A terrorist was killed in an incident in which three soldiers were involved. He is the only one who is still alive. How can he ever have a fair trial?

Sir Henry Bellingham: My hon. Friend anticipates what I am coming on to.

In the Province, 1974 was an incredibly difficult year. A large number of people—just under 300—were killed. It was a very tough and challenging year indeed, with a number of serious incidents. Colleagues will remember the M62 coach bombing, when 12 people were killed by the IRA. They will remember the Provisional IRA bomb that exploded outside the Houses of Parliament, injuring 11 people and causing extensive damage. They will remember the Guildford bombings, carried out by the IRA, and the Birmingham bombings. During that summer in the troubled Province, the Life Guards—one of the most senior regiments of the British Army—were deployed to Armagh, Dungannon and Cookstown. They had a very tough tour, with predominantly young soldiers on the frontline who were under a great deal of pressure but at all times behaved with the utmost professionalism.

I want to look at the Army report of some incidents that took place around that time. The report states that the threat level against the Life Guards in the areas around Dungannon and Armagh was particularly high. All patrols had been warned to take special care. A number of shooting incidents involving the Life Guards had occurred close to English, and it was generally believed that the unrelated non-fatal shooting of a soldier from the Life Guards on 4 June was in direct retaliation to an arms find in that area. The same day, a Life Guard foot patrol surprised a group of young men who were in the process of transferring weapons into a car in the village of Englishtown. The patrol was fired upon, and an exchange of fire took place. Three men were arrested, and a quantity of arms and explosives were recovered. At least three gunmen escaped.

During that particular incident, Corporal Major Dennis Hutchings, to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier) referred, was mentioned in dispatches for his exemplary bravery and leadership. Two days later, Dennis Hutchings led a patrol of four men in a follow-up operation aimed at locating further arms caches near the village of Benburb. They chanced on John Pat Cunningham, who was challenged to give himself up—he was behaving in a suspicious manner. The patrol believed they were threatened. They opened fire and, as we know, John Pat Cunningham was tragically killed. It transpires that he was not a terrorist but an innocent civilian. It was a tragic case of mistaken identity.

That incident was investigated fully by the Life Guards. It was investigated by the military police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Director of Public Prosecutions. The four patrol members were completely exonerated and cleared, and the regiment believed that was the end of the matter. If we fast-forward to 2011, Dennis Hutchings
was staggered and flabbergasted when he was investigated by the PSNI historical inquiries team. A comprehensive investigation took place at the time. He co-operated fully and was told, after a short period, that no further investigations would take place because there was no case to answer and the whole matter could be closed. He specifically asked whether that was the end of it and was told that it was, so he went back to his retirement, to his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and got on with his life.

We now fast-forward to April 2015, when there was a dawn raid on the corporal major’s house in Cornwall. By then he was in very poor health. He was arrested, taken to Northern Ireland for four days of questioning and then charged with attempted murder—of course, a charge he vehemently denies. After 42 years, there are no witnesses left. The three other members of the patrol have died. There is no forensic evidence. There are no weapons left.

I was certainly taught at law school that one of the key tenets of criminal justice is the need for credible, current and corroborated evidence. It is beyond belief that he has been charged. There is no conceivable way he could ever receive a fair trial without proper evidence. These charges fly in the face of all the basic rules of criminal justice. We are seeing an outbreak of revisionism. We cannot simply revisit cases from 42 years ago and try to reinterpret them through the prism of the 21st century, with its emphasis on human rights.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman might take comfort from the Secretary of State’s words last week at Northern Ireland questions, when he said that “the system is heavily focused on the 10% rather than the 90%, and the balanced, proportionate measures that I put forward will assist in changing that.”—[Official Report, 7 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 199.]

Sir Henry Bellingham: That gives me a certain amount of comfort.

What has changed? There is no new evidence, but what has changed is that the DPP in Northern Ireland is now Barra McGrory, QC—the same person who represented Martin McGuinness in the Saville inquiry. This is the person who is prepared to move away from credible evidence to political decision making, which I find very worrying. It has to be stopped. There are potentially 278 more cases involving the security forces. I do not want any more veterans to be dragged out of their retirement homes any more than I want Sinn Féin councillors to be dragged out of council chambers.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Has the hon. Gentleman not hit the nail on the head? This is not about opening cases to find out who is guilty or not guilty. It is about political revisionism, rewriting history, and trying to move the blame from the terrorists to those who served their country faithfully. The Government ought to get a grip on this now and say, “No more.”

Sir Henry Bellingham: I agree entirely. I will quote what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said back in October. She said that “we will never again in any future conflict let those activist, left-wing human rights lawyers harangue and harass the bravest of the brave, the men and women of our Armed Forces.” Furthermore, in a letter from my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces, dated 15 November, to my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), he said that we “will always salute the remarkable dedication and courage of the RUC and our Armed Forces in defending the rule of law and in ensuring that Northern Ireland’s future would only ever be determined by democracy and consent. We will never forget the debt we owe them...we will also never accept ‘equivalence’ between the security forces and those who carried out acts of terrorism.”

I submit in conclusion that we have to find a way forward. We have to draw a line under this. We have to see the scrapping of the legacy investigation branch. I suggest to my hon. Friend the Minister that he look at what happened in South Africa. If he does not want to scrap the legacy investigation branch and put a line under this, could he look at something along the lines of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and amnesty committee that South Africa set up so successfully? The alternative does not bear thinking about. It would represent a betrayal of our armed forces and a tearing up of the military covenant, and could imperil the entire peace process.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I represent the home of the British Army and have constituents in their 70s and 80s who still await a potential knock at the door. My hon. Friend has made a powerful speech. Does he agree that what is being done will seriously damage the morale of British troops? If they feel that their Government are not prepared to stand by them, they will think, “What is the point in putting my life on the line for my fellow citizens?”

Sir Henry Bellingham: I fear that if we do not draw a line under this, we will be not just undermining the morale of our armed forces, but betraying veterans. We could also imperil the entire peace process.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Sir Henry Bellingham has agreed to give four minutes to Danny Kinahan.

4.12 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Thank you, Ms Dorries. I am very pleased to be speaking in the debate, and that the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) initiated it and put the argument so eloquently. I must declare that I was a Household Cavalry officer a long time ago and therefore I have a great deal of interest in this case. When I heard about it, I wrote to every Lord and every MP, to the Secretary of State for Defence and to the Minister for the Armed Forces, and I have spoken with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on two occasions and to the Minister, who I am glad is here today—but all to no avail. All I have really had, all the way through, is the straight bat: “This is an ongoing investigation. Sorry, we can’t speak about it,” or “It’s all part of a future legacy deal.”

I sometimes think that society has gone mad. On 11 November every year, we remember those who died in conflict as their fellow soldiers, sailors and airmen march along, thinking of the horrors and the great heroic moments that they shared, past cenotaphs throughout the United Kingdom. That is what we mark on that day, yet cynically I look at that now and think, are they all walking past and wondering when their day
is coming—when will there be that knock on the door, when will they be called to answer for something they did when they were doing their duty?

I would like to remind everyone that the British Army went to Northern Ireland to keep the peace and, in time, found itself fighting the most vile and horrendous conflict—with terrorists. We are thankful to all who served—I said that in my maiden speech—and we must remember them, and all the work that they have done, all the time.

We have heard that more than 3,000 people died between 1969 and the Belfast agreement in 1998, but many people out there still want closure and, at the same time as all this, we must find a way of getting closure for them. Our sympathy must go to all those who have lost loved ones and especially to the Cunningham family, whom we are talking about today.

The Secretary of State said in September that the approach to legacy should be fair, balanced, impartial and, crucially, proportionate. It is vital that no one is above the law, whether they are security force personnel or paramilitary, and many people feel that there can never be an amnesty of any kind.

What we are concerned with is that the approach to the past is disproportionately focused on state actions. The basic facts that we have heard are that 90% of the deaths during the troubles were a direct consequence of terrorist groups and only 10% were the responsibility of the state. I have heard in a response from the Assistant Chief Constable that out of the 2,538 cases being investigated, 88% are republican or loyalist and 315 are security force cases. We asked about the detail, and we have already heard the numbers. Going through at the moment are 14 cases: eight republican, one loyalist and five security force cases. That is 36%, not 10%, so it is not proportionate. Of those referred by the DPP—four of them—all 100% are security force cases, and one of those is that of Corporal Major Hutchings. Do we really think that that is proportionate?

The Hutchings case is one example of where scrutiny has been applied to the security forces in a way that has not been allowed for others. John Downey was able to blow up the Household Cavalry in 1982. He was given a life sentence—no one has ever been allowed for others. John Downey was able to get a life sentence—no one has ever been allowed for others.

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Sir Gerald Howarth: Forgive me, but that is simply an unacceptable answer from a Minister of the Crown. I am sorry, but this is what we hear. We heard in the previous debate that it was an operational police matter. We are now told that this is a matter for the Police Service of Northern Ireland. This is a matter of public policy. We have heard that Corporal Major Hutchings was told that the matter was closed. Now, in his dotage, it is being reopened. Ministers cannot pass this responsibility to the police force. This is a matter of public policy and the people of Britain—particularly those with whom the Minister formerly served in the armed forces—will expect Ministers to stand by it and not simply pass the buck to the police.

Kris Hopkins: May I respectfully say that I am not going to get into the debate over Mr Hutchings? Actually, the process of law in this country is that politicians and Government do not get involved. There is a department for prosecutions, a criminal process to go through and a police service that must be allowed to pursue its inquiries. We cannot create one set of rules for one part of society and another for another part of society. I will briefly address the issue of proportionality, which is the most important.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Does the Minister understand that many people in Northern Ireland and elsewhere are perplexed and confused about the fact that the PSNI is pursuing people, such as the gentleman who was mentioned, in a disgraceful way, yet senior members come on the radio and cast aspersions about all sorts of people, saying they are involved in criminal activity, and yet do nothing about it? They are talking about active people. Is that not the dichotomy? Is it not disgraceful that people who served their country are being pursued, while police say they know all about the activities of others and are doing nothing about it?

Kris Hopkins: I recognise the right hon. Gentleman’s point. This issue of proportionality is really important and that is why the Secretary of State and others have sought to find a mechanism, because the present situation creates the challenges that people are talking about at this time. We need to find another way that brings proportionality to the system and enables people to feel justice on both sides of society.

Mr Brazier: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has been generous in taking interventions. I welcome his last statement about looking for a new way forward, but does he accept that although the decision to prosecute is independent, the manner in which it is carried out—raiding the house of a great-grandfather with police cars, thus giving away his address and all the rest of it—can be commented on? Indeed, we just had comments on the Met from our right hon. Friend, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, a few minutes ago in another context.

Kris Hopkins: I expect the police to always maintain a high standard when they go to arrest somebody, and I am sure that every Member here would as well.

I want to talk about proportionality. As has been pointed out, 90% of victims were as a consequence of terrorist interventions. The proposals that are out there, which the Secretary of State would like to consult people on, are around how we ensure that those accused, from both the state side and the republican side, are brought before the courts and examined in a proportionate way. The proposals are that each case would be examined chronologically. There will be a conclusion within a period of five years, to give people some closure and some idea of timescale.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): From what the Minister said, I assume he accepts that there is not proportionality within the legacy investigation branch at the moment, given that for places like Enniskillen—the explosion in the poppy day bombing—there is not one police officer investigating that case.

Kris Hopkins: The next line that I was going to read states that the almost exclusive focus on the actions of the state is disproportionate and must be challenged and redressed if we are to deal with the past in a way that is fair and balanced and allows victims and survivors to see better outcomes than the current piecemeal approach. That is why the Government continue to believe that the Stormont House agreement institutions remain the best way forward in dealing with Northern Ireland’s past.

I believe that these proposals will make the situation better for victims and survivors, and will be the only chance we have of prosecuting terrorists who murdered soldiers and police officers along with other innocent victims. I believe that the historical investigations unit, a body proposed under the Stormont House agreement, has a number of important advantages over the current system. I reiterate that it will investigate deaths in a chronological order. The HIU will not focus on the deaths caused by soldiers, as the investigations systems in Northern Ireland do today. Instead, it will take each case in turn and will investigate the many hundreds of murders caused by terrorists, including the murders of soldiers. Honourable Friends, it is estimated that without reform of the current mechanisms, around 185 murders of soldiers, not to mention the many murders of RUC members, will not be investigated. There will be a statutory duty for the HIU to act in a balanced, proportionate, transparent, fair and equitable way. The HIU will be time-limited, as I said, with an objective to bring to an end all investigations into the past in five years.

I have outlined the reasons why the Secretary of State announced his intention to move forward into a public phase on legacy bodies, and why he and I have been engaging extensively with political parties and victims groups to find a way forward in these outstanding cases. I believe that this approach has the potential to build greater confidence in the new bodies and to resolve the remaining issues. It is clear that the status quo is not working well enough for victims and families, and it is time that progress is made. This should create a more proportionate approach in dealing with the past and ensure that the balance of investigations is rightly on the terrorists who caused so much pain and suffering, rather than disproportionately on the brave soldiers and police officers who sacrificed so much to protect us.

Question put and agreed to.
Local Government Funding: Birmingham

4.30 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered local government funding for Birmingham.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Ms Dorries. I asked for this debate because social care services in Birmingham are on the brink of collapse. Public libraries and parks are likely to become a thing of the past and children’s services, which we are supposed to be improving, are braced for swingeing cuts. This is no less than political vandalism; some people in our city are set to experience the most severe and catastrophic consequences of deliberate Government policy.

The core spending power of Birmingham is set to reduce by 5% at a time when some Tory-led authorities have received funding increases of almost 8%. Last February, the Secretary of State announced a hardship fund of transitional money worth £300 million for councils facing the sharpest reductions in grant, but not one penny went to Birmingham. It went to places such as Conservative-led Bromley, Conservative-led Kingston upon Thames, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. How exactly does the Minister justify that state of affairs?

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): This is not the first year that Birmingham has experienced such a situation. There is a pattern and, on top of that, the councils that get a higher percentage increase also have a lower dependency on core funding. Birmingham is therefore being hit disproportionately year after year.

Steve McCabe: My right hon. Friend has anticipated a point that I will make later about council tax, but she is absolutely right: this situation is not new and there is a pattern.

The simple truth is that we are suffering from a legacy of unfairness in our city. Part of that dates back to the 2014-15 and 2015-16 settlements, and as a result the chickens are now coming home to roost on the Minister’s watch. Birmingham, the second city in the country and home to more than 1 million people, is also the second-hardest-hit by Government cuts in the whole country. How is that fair?

Most people would expect a Government Minister to acknowledge the special factors in Birmingham that ought to be taken into account: most of our properties, as I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) indicated, are in council tax bands A, B and C, which means that we have a lower council tax base than many other places. We are therefore more heavily affected by the withdrawal of Government grant and raise proportionately less from council tax or precept rises. We suffer from classic big-city issues. Infant mortality is almost 8%—almost double the national average—and life expectancy for men and women is eight and five years shorter respectively when we compare the most affluent and poorest areas. Birmingham is ranked No. 1 in the country when it comes to the total number of fuel-poor households. We should consider Birmingham’s predicament in that context.

This year we expect a £30 million shortfall in the social care budget; that is after the council has followed the Minister’s advice and slapped an extra 2% social care council tax precept on our local suffering residents. Because extra funding from the social care precept is skewed towards more affluent areas until resources from the improved better care fund become available, we estimate that Birmingham will be disadvantaged to the tune of £98 million in terms of social care come 2017-18. An obvious crumb of comfort that the Minister could offer today would be to say that he will meet us to consider how resources from the better care fund could be used now to recognise the fact that social care spending pressures are being experienced now.

It is not just council services that are teetering on the edge of disaster as a result of deliberate decisions by the Government. Our police have suffered successive cuts to personnel and resources. Just the other day, the chief constable admitted that more than 170,000 calls to 101 went unanswered because of staff shortages. Our NHS is crippled by bed-blocking, rising waiting lists and the spectre of deficits, as well as a sustainability and transformation plan designed to further reduce access to some services.

I have no doubt that, at some point, the Minister will quote his estimate of the city council’s spending figure, as his officials did when they briefed the press earlier today. It is all very well to quote big-sounding numbers from spreadsheets, but what experience does he have of taking an enterprise that is responsible for over 1 million people and slashing its budget by more than £750 million? That is what the Government have done to Birmingham. Health visitors warn that the budget cuts are putting safeguarding at risk. Children’s centres are to be cut so severely that only those who can pass through the super-deprived gateway can expect any help or support. Nurseries, despite the Government’s care offer, are bracing themselves for closures and a massive reduction in services.

The council has almost halved its workforce. More than 12,000 jobs have been lost—those are real people and real jobs. Homelessness prevention services have had to be cut by so much that rough sleeping in Birmingham has quadrupled. On 29 November, a homeless man froze to death on the streets of our city on one of the coldest nights of the year. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), who is not exactly unfamiliar with the city, said at the time:

“I think one person homeless is one person too many so you have always got to do more.”

As the Minister knows, the relentless period of cuts means that we have now reached the stage at which the council has to reconsider the Supporting People budget. I am sure he knows that the sole purpose of that budget was to fund accommodation-related support, particularly supported housing. In 2009, it was his Government who removed the ring fence on the Supporting People budget. We are talking here about homeless young people aged 16 to 25—about care leavers. Elsewhere in this building today, the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families is telling Members about his seven principles for childcare, which he describes as the heartbeat of his plans. How will that work if there is no supported accommodation for those young people?
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and I have every sympathy for what he says, because Coventry has experienced the same thing. Importantly, it was only some weeks ago that a private Member’s Bill was approved in this House and we were being assured that homeless people would be found accommodation. However, we never got a price tag on that.

Steve McCabe: My hon. Friend makes a good point and he is exactly right. It is difficult to see how the Government can say they are doing a great job with the homelessness reduction legislation if its effect will be to impose more duties on local authorities that are unable to fund their existing proposals for Supporting People.

I am concerned about young people, older people with support needs, those with learning disabilities or mental health needs, and the victims of domestic violence. If there is a cut in budgets for Supporting People, all that help is at risk. It will lead to a reduction of provision and a further reliance on the costly unregistered and unregulated sector. Is that what the Minister wants? I commend the Birmingham pathway model for under-25s to the Minister. I understand that it is seen as a national exemplar and has been used to inform the work of his Department in establishing a framework for all other services for single homeless people. Why would he want to stand by and see it close down?

The Minister might want to remind me of the council’s failings and suggest that its members should put their own house in order, rather than complain to the Government. I acknowledge that Birmingham is under scrutiny. We have had: an independent review of education and the appointment of a Government commissioner for education; an independent review of children’s services and the appointment of a children’s services commissioner; and the Kerslake report into the structure and functioning of the council itself, and the appointment of a Government improvement panel to oversee the implementation of the recommended changes. How many meetings has the Minister had with those commissioners and members of the improvement panel since being appointed to his post? Does he consult them weekly or fortnightly? What is the frequency of the contact? Surely he cannot be defending this dire approach to our city’s future without reference to his own appointed experts. Would that not be tantamount to a dereliction of duty on his part?

We want a fundamental re-evaluation of spending needs to determine the funding levels of different local authorities, and we want a fair system, not a skewed or fixed one. We want recognition of some of the unique problems that confront Birmingham and an offer of some transitional support while that re-evaluation takes place. I can try to be helpful to the Minister, if he is in any kind of listening mode. I am not simply calling on him to give the city council more money. I am open to discussions, as are a number of my colleagues—any place, any time—to see what kind of partnerships, innovative approaches and pilot schemes might be available to help to ease the plight of our city and its people. As I have indicated, the Minister might like to consider bringing forward resources from the better care fund to recognise that pressures are being experienced now, and I am open to suggestions about how that extra funding might be distributed. My concern is that those in desperate need get help. If the Minister has set his face against giving any extra money to the city council, I will accept an alternative approach to boosting the overall social care resource if he is ready to make that offer.

The Birmingham Social Housing Partnership has made a proposal to Government to pilot a locally administered co-investment model for supported housing, which would make possible the squeezing out of transactional costs. If agreed, it could be part of a national pilot for the delivery of supported housing. Can the Minister offer any comfort on that front today?

If we do not see some improvement in the financial situation facing our city, I predict dire consequences: the abandonment of the elderly, vulnerable and homeless; the full-scale closure of libraries, public parks and play areas; the second city reduced to a wasteland; and a breakdown of the social consensus on which the very basis of our community exists. Our city has had an extremely raw deal. I beg the Minister to treat these warnings seriously.

4.45 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairwomanship, Ms Dorries.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on securing the debate, not least because, as he said in his powerful speech, but two weeks ago a young man froze to death on the streets of Birmingham. Who are the young homeless? One in 10 young people in Birmingham over the past five years have suffered from homelessness. Half of those in homeless accommodation are young people. I, for one, object sometimes to the caricature of those young homeless people as somehow being druggies, drunks and dropouts. I remember when we organised, here in the House of Commons, the first ever Youth Homeless Parliament, and there were Brummies here from the YMCA and St Basils. We saw quintessentially middle-England young people whose lives had spiralled downwards and who had ended up homeless on the streets.

The Secretary of State said, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak mentioned, that one young homeless person dying on the streets was “one too many”. He went on to say that we always have to do more. That is why, only yesterday, co-ordinated by St Basils, the charity for homeless people in Birmingham, 14 organisations supporting the homeless in Birmingham wrote to the Government calling for a fair settlement for Birmingham. They praised Birmingham City Council for having protected, thus far, the most vulnerable from the biggest cuts in local government history, and said that, thus far, Birmingham City Council had managed to protect the Supporting People budget, unlike many other local authorities. However, they went on to say that it was now becoming increasingly difficult, concluding that there was a social and financial line that should never be crossed. But that is exactly what is happening.

Only today, Alan Fraser, the chief executive of the YMCA in Birmingham, has warned that further cuts to the city council’s budget, with particular reference to Supporting People, will “massively increase the risks of these deaths happening again.” He is right.

The chief executive of Birmingham City Council, Mark Rogers, in a powerful interview, today said something similar, saying that the risks of more people dying were...
“massively increased” because of the cuts. He is right. That is why it is wrong that the great city of Birmingham—Britain’s second city—has been hit by a combination of the biggest cuts in local government history on one hand, and grotesquely unfair treatment on the other. Mark Rogers, a man who is normally cautious in the way he expresses himself, said in the interview:

“We are fast reaching the point where there could be catastrophic consequences for some people.”

That is little wonder, in circumstances where the council’s employee headcount has halved since 2008 from 24,000 to just over 12,000. The council will, by the end of this financial year, have made £800 million of cuts since the era of austerity, which, I stress again, was the biggest in local government history; the council lost 50% of its grant from central Government. Eligibility for social care has been restricted so that only those with substantial or critical needs now receive help.

What we are seeing increasingly in Birmingham—this is heartbreaking—are those 15-minute flying visits to people in need of care, who previously were able to count on something very different and much better. Another £28 million has just gone from the adult care budget. The combination of what is happening in the health service and in the council has led to a £150 million black hole in the city’s finances this year. This is a tough year but, on the current trajectory, things will get even worse in the next financial year, with a further £113 million reduction to the city council’s budget on top of the previous £800 million.

Mark Rogers talks about cuts to youth services. Birmingham used to pride itself on being an exemplar city with its programmes for young people. There were dozens of youth services, but there are now just two left. Birmingham had 40 advice centres in 2010; now there are just four. There is also an increasing impact on children’s centres. Half have gone and, as my hon. Friend said, only those in what are sometimes described as super-deprived communities get the support that people were previously able to count on through the excellent Sure Start children’s centres.

On the very survival of some nursery schools, I took the heads of our four nursery schools in Erdington—Castle Vale, Osborne, Marsh Hill and Featherstone—to meet the Minister with responsibility for nurseries, the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), and they waxed lyrical, as do the people who use those nursery schools, about how they have made a difference to children’s lives. The best way of achieving social mobility is addressing what happens at the ages of two, three and four. I heard powerful stories, including from the grandad who said, “He never used to open his mouth. He was only in the nursery school for nine months, and now he never stops talking.” I heard how the kids have come on and about the support being given to the parents. The idea that some of those nursery schools, which are in a deprived community, now face closure as a result of the sheer scale of what has happened. Indeed, in a stark warning today, the chief executive said that the imposition of large cuts is not simply a response to the 2008 banking crisis:

“Deficit reduction enabled first the coalition and then the straight Tory government to pursue a straight Tory objective of a smaller state.”

He is right, and it is not just that; it is the grotesque unfairness of approach.

After we went to see the Minister and had a good hearing, the nursery school heads were utterly dismayed to see that the outcome of the funding formula review was that Birmingham got less but—surprise, surprise—Maidenhead got more. Overall, Buckinghamshire is being treated twice as fairly as high-need Birmingham. The scale and unfairness is simply wrong.

The previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), a man with whom we had good discussions, admitted to the Members of Parliament for Birmingham earlier this year that there had been an unfairness of approach. We were led to believe that it might be put right but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak said, the £300 million fund overwhelmingly went to leafy, Tory shires. Not a single penny went to Birmingham, despite the sheer scale of the cuts that have been taking place.

As Members of Parliament for the city, we wrote to the Chancellor in advance of the autumn statement to make a series of proposals—I will not repeat what my hon. Friend has already said—including bringing forward the better care fund, greater investment in health and, crucially, a fair local government settlement. As Members of Parliament, we stand ready to engage with the Government on the next stages, but it cannot go on like this, with the Government seemingly oblivious to the sheer scale of what is happening and the sheer scale of the consequences for our city. That is why this debate is so important in asking that the Government hear the city’s case before the local government settlement.

I am proud to represent my Erdington constituency, and I always say that it may be rich in talent but it is one of the poorest in the country. It is a stark statistic that a person who gets on the train at New Street and gets off at Gravelly Hill or Erdington is likely to live seven years less than a person who continues on to Four Oaks in the leafy shires of Sutton Coldfield. That cannot be right.

When such appalling statistics and discrepancies show the sheer scale of what is happening in the city, it cannot be right that our nursery schools and children’s centres are at risk—I stress again that they are vital to giving kids the best start in life.

Home-Start supports struggling families locally, and its services are desperately needed. I have seen its outstanding work first hand, but it is now living from hand to mouth. As a consequence of what has happened to the Supporting People programme, the financial security of New Oscott retirement village and the Ralph Barlow house, which look after those in the twilight of their years and those who are vulnerable for one reason or another, is being fundamentally undermined. The Members of Parliament for Birmingham appeal to the Government to hear the case of Birmingham and to recognise that the sheer scale cannot continue because of the serious implications. The time has come for fair treatment of a great city.
As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries—everyone has said something different. I have just come out of the debate on Aleppo, and a Government Member who served in the armed forces stressed that perhaps we would not be so ready with some of our suggestions had we seen some of the things that he had seen. I express exactly the same sentiment here. If some of those in the Department for Communities and Local Government, including the Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), had seen some of the things that I have seen in my work with the homelessness services in the city of Birmingham, they would not have made the decisions that they have made in the past six years and are continuing to make.

The people who use those services rely on them for their lives. Compare that with the money we spend on other things. I have seen people’s lives saved. These people are not just about managing; they are surviving. Without the refuges, without the St Basils youth homelessness service and without Sifa Fireside—I invite the Minister to sit and eat breakfast with me every morning at Sifa Fireside—we are condemning these people to death with a cut of £5 million to £10 million in Birmingham City Council’s budget for those services. I am not shroud-waving. I am an expert—I know we do not like experts any more—and I know what even half the proposed budget cut to our current Supporting People services will mean. It will basically mean that the services cannot function any more. There are 4,000 victims of domestic violence in the city of Birmingham. Already, every single day, hundreds of people in our city are turned away from specialist services. We are about to start turning away many more.

On average, there are 97 homelessness applications in our city every single day. We used to have services all across the city where people could go to get help and advice, which reduced the number of homelessness applications. I set up some of those services. Birmingham & Solihull Women’s Aid used to provide specialist support in each of our neighbourhood offices so that there was a specialist, not a checkbox, there when a victim of domestic violence came in needing support for their housing. Those specialists have been gone for about two years; the centres they were housed in no longer exist.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) began his powerful comments on the subject of social care. I put in a freedom of information request to every single council in the UK, asking how much they spent weekly on adult social care in care homes. In Birmingham, the spend is £436 per week. That is £100 less than it costs the care homes in my constituency to care for the people who need adult homelessness services. In Buckinghamshire, the weekly cost provided by the council is £615; in Richmond, it is £805.

Yesterday, I asked the Care Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), do the nans and grandads, the aunts and uncles of the mums and dads in Buckinghamshire and Richmond matter more than my nan and grandad, than my mum and dad? Because that is what those figures tell me—and that is post-precept. Those figures show an already widening gap, where some people matter and some people don’t. That is what is being created all around the country.

How does my hon. Friend think the situation will now unfold, given that the funding gap in social care in our city grows to something like a quarter of a billion pounds by 2020-21? Never has a social care system had to withstand this kind of pressure. The situation that she describes is only the beginning.

I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend. There is a huge gap, and it is widening. Care homes in my constituency often get a bad name when we see “Panorama” documentaries about how awful care homes are, but the ones in my constituency are largely not for profit. Yardley Great Trust and Grey Gables have both told me that given the situation with the social care budget, the simple fact is that they will have to close their doors. Where do the people go who live there?

The social care budget problems will not be solved in Birmingham by a further increase in the precept. It is a sticking-plaster on an enormous wound and it will simply put a burden on those who are just about managing, when the percentage of their income that goes on council tax is far higher than for those at the highest end of society. I am not sure why I should be asking those who are just about managing, to pay that price. Perhaps we could ask Andy Street.

What my FOI request revealed about the social care budget is its clear and stark unfairness. Since I came to this House, I have heard an awful lot of Government Members talking about the stark unfairness in schools and education funding—“They are getting loads more money,” and so on. Those calls have been answered by the Government; incidentally, it has meant staff reductions in my constituency, and in my own children’s school. My son’s class will now have 33 children, exceeding the legal limit. I have watched Ministers stand at the Dispatch Box and say, “It isn’t fair that children in Knowsley get this much.” Well, I am here to speak up for the old people of Birmingham. My children are paying the price because this Government are righting a perceived unfairness in schools and education funding. I am asking for my unfairness to be righted, and for social care disparities to be addressed today. The problem is not going away; it is a problem now, and it must stop.

What I would say about all the different people sent into Birmingham City Council—rightly so; I am sure that all of us, as Members of Parliament across the country, have seen our councils do good and bad things and get annoyed at them—is that it seems like moving the deckchairs while Rome burns. Nothing has changed for the end users, the citizens. I ask the Minister to look at the figures—Richmond with its £805 a week. Birmingham with its £400, Coventry with even less and Wolverhampton with £350—and tell me that he thinks that is okay.
Mr Roger Godsiff (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Chairperson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on securing this debate and making such an excellent case on behalf of the people of Birmingham. I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) on adding to it with their comments.

Madam Chairperson—

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. Mr Godsiff, it is appropriate to call me “Ms Dorries” in here, just to save you all tying yourselves up in knots.

Mr Godsiff: I apologise, Ms Dorries. I feel frantic that my city faces a shortfall in its budget next year of £150 million. That could well lead to the closure of children’s centres, leisure centres and libraries and, as has been said, cuts to care services. I feel doubly affronted today; because if he does not, there will be consequences, local government and that he does believe that Birmingham faces a “catastrophic” situation if nothing is done, and that youth services in Birmingham are virtually non-existent. Birmingham is the youngest city in the country. It has a huge population of young people, many of whom are Muslim. What does the Minister think the effects will be if youth services in Birmingham cease to exist? Where will those young people go? The Government are rightly concerned about radicalisation among young people, but if they do not have centres to go to where they have the opportunity to mix with young people from other communities, play with them and enjoy life with them, they will be more and more vulnerable to the small percentage of people within their communities who seek to radicalise them.

Birmingham has had more arrests under the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005 than any city in the country. Only this week, two people in Birmingham were given long sentences for funding the Brussels bombing attacks. If the Minister wants to prevent young people from becoming radicalised, he must give them not only hope but facilities. If a city such as Birmingham has virtually no youth services, as the chief executive said, I fear the consequences.

I am sure that the Minister is an honourable man, but I remember that the Tory Secretary of State Nicholas Ridley said in the 1980s that local councils needed only two meetings a year—one to hand out the contracts, and the second to review them—and that local government did not really need to exist. I very much hope that the Minister will give some assurance that he does believe in local government and that he does believe that Birmingham City Council has the problems that have been outlined today; because if he does not, there will be consequences, and the people of Birmingham will know exactly who is to blame.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on securing it, on making such a detailed, determined and effective speech on behalf of his constituents and on defending his city as he did. I also acknowledge the contributions of my right hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), for Coventry, Foleshill (Mr Cunningham), for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), and for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff), who supported my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak today and who each sought to defend and make the case for the people of Britain’s second city.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak set out the scale of the cuts that have hit Birmingham—some £90 million in 2016-17 in total. After Liverpool, Birmingham is the local government area hit hardest by the Government’s funding cuts: some £750 million has been cut from its budget since 2010. He went on to point out very powerfully the failure of the Conservatives to ensure any transitional funding at all for Birmingham in last year’s settlement. Conservative-led Surrey got £12 million and Hampshire got £19 million; those are just two examples, alongside the others he mentioned, of areas that benefited from the transitional funding package, while his city—one of the biggest and most significant local authority areas in the UK—got nothing at all.

I will come back to some of my hon. Friend’s opening remarks, but let me first dwell on the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington. He referenced the impact of local authority cuts on homelessness in Birmingham, and particularly on young people suffering homelessness. He noted the work of 14 charities in Birmingham that support their Members of Parliament today in demanding a better settlement for Birmingham and in praising the efforts of the council to protect the most vulnerable in challenging times.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I do not want to detract from the bigger issue of Birmingham, but I am sure that my hon. Friend knows that other local authorities in the west midlands are experiencing exactly the same cuts to public services—youth services, libraries, teachers, education budgets, social services, you name it.

Mr Thomas: My hon. Friend widens the debate to the impact of cuts in funding on local authority areas throughout the west midlands. He could also have widened it to underline the cuts in funding that all English local authorities have suffered since 2010. In that context, Thursday’s local government finance settlement will be particularly important, not only for Birmingham and for local authorities in the west midlands but for the whole of England.

If he will forgive me for saying so, my hon. Friend interrupted my praise for the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington, who underlined a number of points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak about the need for further improvements in areas for which the council
is responsible. He said quite rightly that that is absolutely no justification for the scale of cuts that various local government Ministers have demanded of Birmingham’s public services.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley made particularly powerful points about the impact of local authority funding cuts on the many victims of domestic abuse in Birmingham. She backed up the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak, and for Birmingham, Erdington on the impact of homelessness in Birmingham and the lack of available support. She underlined the significance of Birmingham’s social care funding crisis, which we will particularly need to focus on when the local government finance settlement is debated on Thursday. She went on to widen the debate from services directly funded by local authorities to other public services. She spoke about the impact on children in our schools of the real-terms cuts in schools funding. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak referenced the impact of other aspects of the funding cuts on the national health service and the police.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green made a series of important points about the impact on youth services, which, when they exist, can offer alternatives to crime and radicalisation. He underlined the concern expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak about the scale of the cuts in youth services that Birmingham City Council has had to push through because of the loss of funding.

Before the debate, we had the chance to read some of the comments made to the media by the chief executive of Birmingham City Council, Mark Rogers. It is impossible for anybody who has read his comments to doubt the veracity of my hon. Friends’ contributions today. He spoke about the “catastrophic consequences for some people” in the city of Birmingham of years of cuts that have forced it to slash funding for key services for vulnerable people. He said that the council had “just two youth centres” left and that the “youth service has all but gone.”

The article also states that, according to Mr Rogers, “homelessness prevention services had been cut by so much that rough sleeping had quadrupled”.

Understandably, he is worried about the impact of cuts in funding on social care and about how fewer elderly people are now eligible for care at home. He is expecting to have to implement £113 million of cuts in 2017-18, on top of the cuts that have been made since 2010. In the context of the much-debated social care crisis, which many Members on both sides of the House have underlined to the Government, the fact that Birmingham is having to look at taking almost £30 million out of its adult care budget will be profoundly worrying to anyone who knows people who are elderly, in need of care or vulnerable in other ways.

We already know from the letter that Ministers sent to councils last year with the details of their funding settlement that the Government increasingly expect councils such as Birmingham to increase council tax by as much as 20% by 2020. Across the country, that is equivalent to an increase in average band E of about £300 a year by 2020. Effectively, the people of Birmingham are being expected to pay 20% more in council tax while getting dramatically lower levels of service. Will they get better street cleaning? Will their bins be emptied more regularly? Will they have a better chance of seeing the elderly people they love get better care? Sadly, the brutal truth is that the quality of services is going down as the Government seek to continue to cut funding.

We are told that Ministers are no longer talking about austerity, but the brutal reality of the cuts in funding that Ministers are still making is that public services will continue to decline. We hope for something different when the local government finance settlement is announced on Thursday.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): I begin with an apology on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), who is unable to be here to respond to the debate because of a personal issue. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries, and to respond to a Westminster Hall debate for the first time as a Minister. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on securing this debate and for the passionate way he presented the issues facing Birmingham, as did, indeed, other Members who took part in the debate.

We should remind ourselves of the context in which local government operates. Many of the decisions that have been taken by Birmingham City Council have been taken locally and independently of central Government, although that is not to pretend that the Government have not had a role to play through challenging funding settlements, about which we have been quite honest over the years. We have been absolutely clear that, as councils account for a quarter of public spending, they, too, need to play their part in deficit reduction. No Member present went into the most recent general election offering more money for local government—that was accepted across the various parties.

We have tried to provide local authorities with a fair and sustainable financial settlement. Fundamentally, we have provided councils with a financial settlement that is broadly flat in cash terms, moving from £44.5 billion in 2015-16 to £44.3 billion in 2019-20. Over the course of this Parliament, council core spending will see a decrease of just 0.4% in cash terms. As a result, councils will have almost £200 billion to spend on local services. Birmingham’s average core spending power per dwelling will remain significantly higher than that for many other metropolitan authorities. We must remember that £1,983 per dwelling compares with £1,767 for other local authorities, and is higher than in Manchester and Leeds, which have had to manage similar issues.

Like many other Members, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak raised the issue of social care, which is undoubtedly a massive challenge for the country given the changing demographics. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) asked whether I personally care about local government. I spent 10 years as a local councillor when some of the difficult decisions we are now facing started to be made. Over that period, which was not when we were in government but under a different Government, we saw councils start to change their intervention criteria substantially due to rising
[Andrew Percy]

pressures. This is not an issue that has developed overnight. We have to be honest that it is a massive challenge for the country to deal with.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak, along with others, mentioned NHS funding. It is at a record level, although I do not for a moment pretend that that will necessarily deal with all the issues relating to the demographic shift—the increasing pressures, the increasing number of people going through the system, the cost of treatment, the number of people living with long-term conditions, and all the rest of it—that is putting huge pressure on the social care and health system. I do not for a moment want to pretend that the issues we are discussing are solely related to local government funding, or that they have developed overnight.

The Government are providing Birmingham with £77 million of new support for social care by 2019-20. Over the four-year period, assuming the social care precept is taken up, the figure will be £149 million, but of course I must put that in the context of changing demography and increasing demand. Many other countries in the west are trying to deal with the same issues. We have also delivered to Birmingham, and local government generally, guaranteed budgets to councils for 2016-17 and for every year of the Parliament. Birmingham is among the 97% of councils to have signed up to that. We are looking to have 100% retention of business rates by the end of the Parliament.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak mentioned the independent improvement panel. We have to put many of the decisions that are currently being taken in Birmingham in the context of a failure to deliver on the budgets that we passed and outlined. I welcomed the contribution of colleagues who said that they understood some of the challenges to have resulted from budgetary issues and management in Birmingham. The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Government had met the independent improvement panel. As it happens, I met one of its members yesterday, as Councillor Nick Forbes, the Labour leader of Newcastle City Council, was taking part in the independent financial review. As this is not my policy area, I have not met the other members of the panel, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that DCLG officials are meeting them regularly, and the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton, has done so on several occasions as well.

Steve McCabe: I do not want to interrupt the Minister, and I appreciate that this is not his specific policy area, but when Ministers or departmental officials have met the improvement panel, have they heard the panel tell them that it is worried about the level of resources available in Birmingham?

Andrew Percy: The hon. Gentleman will understand that I have not been in the meetings so I cannot comment on their content. Needless to say, because I was meeting Councillor Forbes yesterday to discuss another matter, I had a brief conversation with him about the issues in Birmingham, but I cannot comment beyond that.

I could list lots of the other investment the Government are putting into Birmingham through local growth deals, which are having a significant impact and transforming people’s lives, but I want to respond to as much of the debate as possible rather than discuss overall investment in the region. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) made a powerful case about transition funding, which was also mentioned by other Members. Birmingham did not get transition funding for the simple reason that it had benefited from the 2015-16 change. The shire counties were the authorities hardest-hit by that change, so the transition funding was naturally focused on them.

The hon. Lady also mentioned school funding. I represent the third-worst—sometimes worst—funded education authority. If she wants to come to Goole in my community, she will also see very high levels of deprivation and huge challenges, but ones that we have to address with many hundreds—

Jess Phillips: Do your schools have 33 kids in their classes?

Andrew Percy: Yes, some of them do. We have funding differences of many hundreds of pounds below the national average, let alone our neighbouring authorities. Nobody owns one particular community. I grew up in one of the poorest cities in the country and attended one of the worst comprehensive schools, and for many years I taught in some of the toughest schools in the country, let alone in the city. I understand the challenges as well as the hon. Lady, as do others on the Government Benches. Some of her comments were a little divisive, trying to set Tory-run shires against Labour-run metropolitan areas. There are huge challenges in many areas. Deprivation and poverty do not necessarily respect local government boundaries.

A couple of points were made about homelessness, which is of course a massive challenge. I cannot comment on the specifics of the funding decisions that have been made in Birmingham, but the Government do take the issue seriously, which is why we have supported the Homelessness Reduction Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). Homelessness is at half its 2003 peak. Birmingham has received nearly £1.1 million in homelessness prevention funding for 2016-17, and we are investing £500 million in seeking to tackle homelessness.

In the short time remaining, I say to Members who represent Birmingham that the Government see solving the issues there as a partnership. It is important that the decisions that need to be taken on financial management in Birmingham are taken. As I have said, other local authorities and metropolitan boroughs have, with less spending power per dwelling, dealt with the very challenging settlements for local government. We want to assist Birmingham in doing the same. We have to wait for the independent financial review, which should conclude in the middle of January, to report so that we can consider matters further.

We are determined to try to get Birmingham, like many of the metropolitan councils, into a position where the budgets that are set are realistic, so that people know what services are being delivered. Plenty of other local authorities, many with much lower funding per dwelling, are not reducing services in the way described today. Key to that is having a budget that is viable and realistic, which is what we hope will come out of this process.
Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered local government funding for Birmingham.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 14 December 2016

[Albert Owen in the Chair]

UK Sovereign Wealth Fund

9.30 am

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK Sovereign Wealth Fund.

It is good to have you looking after us this morning, Mr Owen. The title and subject of this debate come from a proposal I published recently, with help from the good people at the Social Market Foundation, called “The Great Rebalancing: A sovereign wealth fund to make the UK’s economy the strongest in the G20”. It is available in all good book stores; failing that, it is on my website with a slightly pithier summary alongside it, written for The Times’s “Red Box” column.

The reason for writing the proposal was simple. This is a crucial moment for Britain. Brexit creates an inflection point—an opportunity to ask ourselves fundamental questions for the first time in many years about what kind of country we want to be once we leave the European Union. How can we best use the spur of our newly won freedoms to change the way our country works? What do we want our economy, our society, our cities and our countryside to look like? “The Great Rebalancing” is an attempt to answer at least some of those questions.

For years, economists of all kinds, of left and right, have said rightly that Britain is worse at long-term planning than other countries. We save less, invest less and build less economically vital growth-promoting infrastructure, such as roads, railways and ports, than they do. Other oil-rich countries such as Norway have built up large sovereign wealth funds, but we have not. We have a rock ’n’ roll economy that lives for today and do not plan for tomorrow.

The result is that we lag behind the United States, Germany, France and even Italy in productivity. It takes a German worker four days to produce what we Brits can produce in a week. It takes a French worker three days to produce what we Brits can produce in a week. It takes an Italian worker two days to produce what we Brits can produce in a week. We are less productive, and build less economically vital growth-promoting infrastructure that works for everyone today, than other countries, and we will not be able to raise our living standards sustainably or to build an economy that works for everyone unless we fix that fundamental underlying issue.

Even worse, we have huge national debt, partly as a hangover from the 2008 financial crisis, but mainly because of the promises we have made in our pay-as-you-go pensions and benefits system create long-term liabilities that are, financially, effectively the same as debt. That is not fair to our children and grandchildren, who will have to repay the money we have borrowed. We are handing them the bills for our lifestyle, rather than paying for it ourselves. These are long-term structural problems that are deeply ingrained in our economy and in our politics. They have taken decades to build up, and they will take just as long to solve.

Part of the answer is to invest more in crucial economic infrastructure such as roads, bridges, railways and ports, and to keep doing it consistently and predictably. To my mind, the most important and least noticed bit of the Chancellor’s autumn statement was not the £23 billion investment pledge for innovation and infrastructure, although that was certainly welcome and valuable. It was the instruction to the National Infrastructure Commission to plan for a future where, every year, we spend between 1% and 1.2% of GDP on this stuff, rather than 0.8%, as we do today. That is not a one-off; it is a permanent change that he proposes. It stops the infrastructure boom and bust that we have suffered for decades, in which Governments postpone critical growth-promoting projects whenever money gets tight. Making our investments boringly predictable really matters, because stop-start spending does not only delay growth; if there is not a smooth pipeline of projects, taxpayers get less value for money, and we cannot build as much with the money we have.

But what about that huge national debt? How do we make things fair for our children and grandchildren? First, we have to stop adding to the debt, which means stopping borrowing. The autumn statement said the deficit will be down to 2% by 2020, cyclically adjusted across the business cycle, which is a vital step in the right direction. My proposal goes one step further and asks for an annual public declaration by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility to ensure the Government’s budget stays balanced across the economic cycle in future. That is a small but crucial piece of fiscal rule making.

We gave the OBR responsibility for the financial forecasts to stop Chancellors using fairytale projections to cover up problems when they were under pressure. Once we have finally balanced the budget, sometime during the next Parliament, we should extend that same mechanism a little further, to shine a harsh and unforgiving spotlight on any future Chancellor who is not prepared to live within the country’s means. We have not, after all, endured years of austerity and belt-tightening just to have a future financially irresponsible Chancellor toss it all away.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman envisage a permanent budget surplus?

John Penrose: At this point in my remarks, I envisage a consistently balanced budget across the economic cycle. That would be a major step forward and, given this country’s history since the second world war, it would produce a welcome degree of certainty for businesses, Government and everyone else. I will come on to how we might then build up the sovereign wealth fund that the hon. Gentleman might like to come back at me at that point if he thinks I have not covered the issue properly.

Once we have stopped borrowing, we can start saving, which is the point the hon. Gentleman just made. That is where the sovereign wealth fund comes in. Most of that huge national debt comes from our pay-as-you-go state pension and benefits scheme, so paying off Government bonds—giltswill not be enough on its
own. Even worse, we cannot just grow our way out of trouble, because the pension and benefits scheme’s liabilities will just grow with us. Instead, we need a sovereign wealth fund to pay for what we owe in our pensions and benefits system.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): As the hon. Gentleman is one of the more assiduous members of his party, he will have seen that the Co-operative party floated in September 2013 this very idea of a UK sovereign wealth fund. Does he see our proposal of turning the Crown Estate into that sovereign wealth fund as an attractive idea?

John Penrose: I have not included in my paper any proposal to take existing Government assets and pour them into the sovereign wealth fund, to give it a kick-start. It would be possible, and there are parallels. The previous Chancellor floated the idea of a regional shale gas sovereign wealth fund, based on the proceeds from fracking. A number of Government assets could be added to any sovereign wealth fund, though in my paper, I do not propose that they should be, but there are respectable parallels. For example, the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund is based on the proceeds of its North sea oil. That is certainly an option to consider. I am not proposing it here, but it is certainly not beyond the bounds of possibility. There are very respectable parallels and antecedents elsewhere in the world.

We need a sovereign wealth fund to pay for what we owe in our pensions and benefits system. It would give the scheme the same strong financial foundations as other occupational pension schemes in the UK for the first time in our country’s history. Like those other schemes, it should be managed through a fully independent board—in this case, a new stand-alone national insurance trust with a heavyweight board of trustees, like that of the Bank of England, to prevent political meddling.

Building the fund is rather like repaying a mortgage or saving for a pension: we have to put a little aside every month for a very long time. We would start by creating a new national debt charge, carved out of income tax, to pay the interest on the national debt, currently projected to be just over 2% of GDP by 2021. It would be set as a percentage of GDP and, as the economy grew, any surplus would be used to build up the fund. The process needs to take a long time—several generations—so that the costs do not all fall unfairly on current taxpayers. It is urgent too, because we need to start soon. There will be a brief moment, when the Government’s budget reaches balance in the next Parliament, when we could set the fund up, but old, bad habits die hard. As soon as there is a hint, a sniff, of a surplus, there will be dozens—hundreds—of proposals for tax cuts or extra spending from both sides of the House. Many of them will be excellent ideas, but we must ensure that we do not miss the golden opportunity to set the fund up at that moment, when we can, before it is too late and any surplus money is earmarked for other things.

We must ensure that all the effort and sacrifice of getting the budget in balance is not wasted. A balanced budget cannot be just a one-off episode of fiscal sobriety, in which our rock ‘n’ roll economy detoxes for a few months before hitting the party scene again. We need a long-term commitment to clean living—to the fundamental rebalancing of our economy that the sovereign wealth fund would deliver.

Creating the fund would rebalance our economy; build stronger foundations, so that we invest more for the long term; deliver faster growth and extra jobs, so that we could afford stronger and better public services; insulate us against the next economic shock, such as the latest banking crisis; make us less dependent on foreign investors once Brexit is complete; build our international heft around the world; and answer some of those fundamental questions about the kind of country that we want to be after we leave the EU.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his choice of debate. I agree with him about the long-term thinking that will be required to create a sovereign wealth fund. Does he agree with me that successive Governments need to commit to the promotion of a wealth fund? Then the beneficiaries throughout the United Kingdom will support it, because they will see tangible benefits accruing from it.

John Penrose: That is a crucial point. As I said, we need to start building the fund soon. It is an urgent priority that we should begin it when the budget hits balance, but once we have begun, we need to save a little for a very long time, and that needs to last over several generations, so that the burden of setting the thing up does not fall unfairly on the current generation of taxpayers. The hon. Gentleman is exactly right: for it to be stable over such a long time, it needs to be politically stable. That means two things. First, I hope that it has cross-party consensus behind it, so that it will have some degree of political longevity; secondly, it will need institutional bulwarks to prevent Chancellors of whichever party, when they are under pressure—facing a general election or a cyclical recession—from interfering, meddling or trying to get their sticky fingers on the money. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the fund will need very strong institutional safeguards around it. Those are laid out in some detail in my paper. I did not plan to go into huge detail about that here. I am happy to, if anyone wants me to, but I thought that I would spare everyone the detail at this stage, simply because of pressure of time and because other hon. Members want to add their thoughts.

If we could do what I propose, we would be a fairer, more generationally just country, because we would not be saddling our children and grandchildren with the bills for our lifestyle. We would be more socially just, because low and high taxpayers would all own the same pension and benefit payments.

I hope that all of us in the debate, including my hon. Friend the Minister, will deal with three issues. First, can we all agree that rebalancing our economy is necessary and important? A number of Members have suggested in interventions that there may be consensus on that, but it would be good to get that on the record from hon. Members on both sides of the House if we can. Secondly, can we all acknowledge that once we have the budget in balance, reducing the bits of our national debt that we happen to have issued as Government bonds will not be
enough to achieve rebalancing on its own? Thirdly, can we all accept that a sovereign wealth fund to underpin the state pension and benefit system is at least one valid way of solving the deeply ingrained imbalances and problems in our nation’s economy and finances, even if there may be other ways as well?

Think of it: if we can agree on some or all of those issues, cross-party, we could launch a new Britain—a socially just, generationally just, asset-owning democracy on a scale that no other developed nation could match.

The post-war Governments created new institutions such as the NHS and the welfare state, which had little relevance to rebuilding homes and cities damaged in the war, but everything to do with forging a new society and nation. The post-Brexit Government is our generation’s chance to do the same—to leave a mark, to mould and weld our fractured society into a new and better shape. This will be a brief political moment in which, if we grasp it without fear, whether we are from the political left or right, we can create a legacy for our children and grandchildren to remember us by with pride, so let us think big and long term, and let us do this together.

George Kerevan: There might be broad agreement on what we are discussing, but the hon. Gentleman has premised much of his case on a surplus being run. As I understand it, the three fiscal rules that the new Chancellor has introduced have moved away from the previous budget surplus rule, and nothing in the current fiscal rules says that we will run a permanent surplus.

John Penrose: What I propose would take effect once we had got the budget in balance. The Chancellor’s new set of fiscal rules is designed to take us through the next few years before we get the budget in balance, but once we do get it in balance, any Chancellor—as we are talking about the period after the next general election, I hope that it will be the current Chancellor, but I will not prejudge the results of that election—will need to rethink and reset fiscal rules. What I argue, as the hon. Gentleman will have heard, is that there should be a national debt charge, initially just to cut out what we are already committed to paying in terms of interest on the debt, but as the economy grows, that would slowly start to yield a very small surplus, which could be used to pay into the sovereign wealth fund. That is a very long-term process, but we need to start it soon.

9.46 am

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) on securing the debate and raising this most important topic. He asked whether there could be a consensus across the House. There are those of us on this side who have been arguing for infrastructure investment for quite some time, for the simple reason that we need to build capacity in the economy—we need to create the circumstances for growth.

We all want a high-wage economy; we would absolutely welcome that. The debate is about the mechanisms that will create it. We make the point that if we want to deliver a balanced budget in this country, that has to come through the delivery of economic growth; it cannot come on the backs of the poor, as has been the case over the last few years because of austerity. The issue has to be about building capacity in the economy, creating the circumstances for growth, which perhaps can deliver the kind of outcomes that the hon. Gentleman talks about.

I am delighted that we are having this debate, but in some senses it is happening too late for us in Scotland. As the House of Commons Library briefing paper confirms, more than 30 countries have sovereign wealth funds, and it is estimated that funds based on oil and gas receipts are responsible for more than half the global total value of those funds. We in the Scottish National party have long argued that we should have established a wealth fund from our oil revenues to ensure that future generations could benefit from the proceeds of North sea oil. Not for the first time, and over a long time, Westminster was not listening.

The UK Government have taken a staggering £340 billion in tax receipts from North sea oil. Where has that gone? Why have we not seen a legacy from that bounty for all the people in this country? It was not invested to ensure that there was a legacy for future generations. Rather than North sea oil receipts being looked at as a bounty that could be invested to ensure that there was future growth, the proceeds of North sea oil were frittered away.

Let us contrast the UK’s lack of foresight with the foresight of our near neighbours in Norway. Norway’s wealth fund, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, now exceeds £905 billion; the value is $177,000 per capita—for each Norwegian citizen. That astonishing sum shows what can be done if people take the right approach to investing in their future. The Norwegians recognised that oil was a bonus. It will run out at some point, but they ensured that their country would have a lasting benefit. Let me quote what The Economist said in an article in September this year:

“Two decades after Norway’s government paid a first deposit into its sovereign-wealth fund, the country is learning how to manage a behemoth. The vehicle, which is used to invest abroad the proceeds of Norway’s oil and gas sales, has amassed a bigger fortune than anyone expected, thanks to bumper oil prices.”

The hon. Gentleman has talked about a wealth fund that may build up over generations, but Norway has achieved the largest wealth fund in the world after two decades because it was prepared to put something away for future generations. In that sense, I support the broad outline of what he says. The article goes on:

“As the direct benefits of oil decline—around 46% of Norway’s expected total haul of oil and gas is gone—the relative importance of the fund will grow. The annual revenues it generates now regularly exceed income from oil sales.”

Establishing a wealth fund from the benefits of North sea oil receipts is an effective means of protecting an economy from oil prices that can prove to be volatile. In that sense, the lucrative revenue generated by oil and gas is used to protect its own longevity as well as the overall prosperity and stability of an economy during price swings. We have known all that for decades.

The McCrone report, delivered to the UK Cabinet Office in 1974, claimed that North sea oil revenues could have made an independent Scotland as economically prosperous as Switzerland. The report was so alarming that the UK Government buried it as a top secret for 30 years. That is, perhaps, of little wonder. Scotland’s bounty has kept the UK afloat; there is no lasting financial legacy for Scotland. The Norwegians have a
foundation of financial security; we have a UK Government who would not come clean on the benefits of North sea oil and have denied us the opportunity to have our own legacy from that bounty. Yes, let us plan for a sovereign wealth fund, but that should have been delivered over the past few decades.

Denis Healey said the following about the saga:

“I think we did underplay the value of the oil to the country because of the threat of”

Scottish “nationalism”.

He said he thought that Westminster politicians “are concerned about Scotland taking the oil, I think they are worried stiff about it.”

That is the reality, yet we are constantly told by Westminster politicians about the perils of Scottish independence and that we cannot afford to take responsibility for our own destiny. If we had this oil fund, that would give us the tools to manage any financial storms like those we have witnessed over the past few years.

Denis Healey let the cat out of the bag: it was a worry that the wealth of Scotland could create this oil fund and undermine the significance of Westminster. McCrone suggested way back in the 1970s that an oil fund should be set up, but here we are in 2016 asking why we have not done so.

Mr Gregory Campbell: There is an emerging consensus about the need to think long term in regard to the wealth fund. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that some people will listen to his comments about an oil fund and undermine the significance of Westminster. McCrone suggested way back in the 1970s that an oil fund should be set up, but here we are in 2016 asking why we have not done so.

Ian Blackford: I agree, in so far as we have to establish the mechanisms to make sure that we have something left for future generations and the issue is not just about oil. What I want to do in this debate is talk about the missed opportunities and how we can learn from them.

I will come specifically to how we can deal with not only the financial crisis but the decline in oil prices over the past few years. We cannot run away from the fact. We know that oil prices are depressed at the moment and that revenues from North sea oil have declined alarmingly, and that that will remain the case for the next couple of years. However, there is still the value of 2 billion barrels of oil in the ground under the North sea, and at some point oil prices will recover: there will still be the opportunity to create that oil fund out of the North sea oil revenues.

Mr Gareth Thomas: In the words of Oasis, the hon. Gentleman is looking back in anger. I understand, given his political perspective, why he is doing that. Might I encourage him to look forward and to think about how we might establish a sovereign wealth fund going forward? Has he had the chance—assiduous politician as he most definitely is—to reflect on the Co-op party proposal, which envisages turning the Crown Estate into the beginnings of a UK sovereign wealth fund?

Ian Blackford: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s kind remarks. We need to make sure that people in this country can benefit from the wealth that is created. It is a reasonable contribution to the debate to consider what should happen with the Crown Estate.

I would actually take things a stage further because I want to see the benefits of the Crown Estate come down to our communities. There is considerable value generated by the Crown Estate in the highlands and islands of Scotland and we have seen none of the direct benefit of that. Of course some of that will be devolved to the Scottish Government over the coming years, but I do not want the assets of the Crown Estate to sit in a fund, whether that be in London or in Edinburgh; I want my communities in the highlands and islands to benefit directly from it.

There is a bounty that will no doubt come from offshore wind over the course of the next few generations, and I want to take that opportunity to make sure that its benefits and bounty are reinvested back into the highlands and islands, so that we can broaden the base of sustainable economic growth. I agree with the broad direction of travel that the hon. Gentleman has suggested, but I would do it in a slightly different way to make sure that our local communities get direct benefit from the bounty of the Crown Estates.

I know that many other Members want to speak, so I will move on quickly. We have long argued that to take account of the volatility of North sea oil, we have to establish not just one, but two, funds as and when circumstances permit: a stability fund and a savings fund. Why a stability fund? It is an implicit recognition of the volatility of commodity pricing and a desire to set a cautious budget that would allow excess tax receipts generated in periods of high oil prices to be released for current spending at a time of price weakness. That would create stability of revenue sources for Government spending and protect the economy from price shocks.

Secondly, a long-term savings fund would, as is the case in the 30 countries that have established such funds, have a long-term legacy for future generations. A lack of vision and a focus on only the short-term have seen the UK consistently refuse to do that. If we are now seeing an emerging consensus challenging that, I will be delighted.

Although I welcome this debate and the initiative of the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare, what he argues for is simply not going to happen in the short term given the state of the UK’s finances today. We need to make sure that in Scotland, as circumstances dictate, we can return to this as a solution for us all.

In the short term, maximising the potential for the North sea and west of Shetland must be a priority. The fiscal and regulatory regime must therefore support ongoing investment, so that we can continue to benefit from the oil that is still there to sustain jobs and our future prosperity. We have taken a substantial bounty from the North sea. Now is not the right time to establish a wealth fund; now is the time to put in place mechanisms that will support the industry, development and the ability to extract longer-term value and, of course, taxation revenue.

Just as those in Westminster sat on their hands when an oil fund should have been established, they have now been slow to respond to the weakness in oil and gas.
prices. Inaction has impacted the ability to maximise recovery in the industry. Today, the priority is to support this industry with an eye on creating the circumstances that will allow us to return to the needs of establishing an oil fund. For us, recovery in the oil industry and in tax revenues goes hand in hand with a transition to a green economy. It is part of a holistic approach that recognises that we need to adapt to a new, low-carbon economy.

I say yes to a sovereign wealth fund, but as part of a wider strategy. It is just a pity that we have missed so many opportunities and that, in the meantime, Scotland has missed out.

9.58 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always nice to be called to speak, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) on setting the scene on a subject that has to be discussed and given some thought in this House. Those of us here, and those who unfortunately have not been able to make it, will have ideas about how to do this. This is the first stage of a discussion that we should, perhaps, have had many years ago. At least we are starting the process; let us start it with this discussion. I look forward to the shadow Minister’s contribution, other Members’ contributions and, in particular, the Minister’s response on how to take this forward.

We are considering the proposals put on paper by the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare in his report, “The Great Rebalancing: A sovereign wealth fund to make the UK’s economy the strongest in the G20”. That is a very grand title, but it encapsulates his thoughts on the subject—and, perhaps, our thoughts as well. An enormous level of thought and groundwork went into these proposals. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the paper, which we read—not just the background notes—back home, and it gave us food for thought. I am astonished that he found the time to do so much work on it. Anyone who takes the time to read the background notes will understand the time that he has put into writing this paper, which is worthy of discussion in the House, and in Westminster Hall today.

I was raised to save for a rainy day, as many in my generation were—and that is not just because I am an Ulster Scot and we think that every pound is a prisoner. I was taught to save for a rainy day at an early age by my mother and father, and it has not done me any harm over the years. I am now married, of course, and the money is never my own anymore; it belongs to her, but that is by the bye. I do not wish to dumb down in any way the hard work of the hon. Gentleman, but to me this is like the Government saving for a rainy day, as I said to him when discussing the debate beforehand. The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who spoke before me, is a strong advocate for the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—women and their pensions, and I am glad he is here. Before I came in, I thought, “What if we had had this fund 20 years ago? We would have been able to look after the WASPI women and make sure their pensions were covered.” We did not, but at least we have chance to look at this issue now.

Ian Blackford: As always, the hon. Gentleman makes a number of pertinent remarks. There is a view that we do not have the resources to pay the appropriate pensions to people, but we should keep an eye on the Government Actuary’s Department, which has argued—I am keen that people should not get away from this—that the national insurance fund will be in surplus to the tune of about £30 billion by 2016-17. The resources are there to give the women what they are due, and over the next 20 or 30 years, pensions will remain affordable.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those figures. I was not aware of them, but if that money is available, perhaps we are in a position to start the fund today with some of those resources.

I am sure that, like me, many hon. Members, including the hon. Gentleman, will know of 63-year-old women in their constituency who still have to work as their pension is unavailable. Those women are wishing that in the 1980s, at the time of the North sea oil find, which we have heard many comments about, the Government had decided to invest in a rainy day fund, which could have helped the pension pot. For that reason, the sovereign wealth fund must be considered seriously by the Government. That is why this matter is worthy of debate.

This issue is not cut and dried, by any means. There is talk of the Government’s shale fund being similar to this plan, as the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare mentioned, but this is not the day to debate the pluses and minuses of fracking. A lot of hard work would need to be carried out before the fund saw any profit, but many people are already making claims about the potential for shale oil, if that comes through—and I suspect that, at some time, it will. We must think about what can be done for the future benefit of all people in the UK. Today’s austerity is a reality for us all. We have to be honest in this House about moneys and finances.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I apologise for my late arrival, Mr Owen; I had another meeting. Does my hon. Friend agree that we have to look forward, when it comes to these funds? Oil prices, fracking and all the rest have been referred to, but we have to debate the issue as a whole, including wind turbines and all of that. Green energy could be as much as 40% more expensive, and we have to look at all of it. If we are going to put money in, we have to get the price correct.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for his intervention. As always, it is good to have his businesslike approach; he looks at the real issues critically and focuses on the situation that we are in. We need to look at the issue more widely and at some things that will cost more. That is part of the debate for the future.

We all know that the deficit needs to be cut, as the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare openly acknowledged, yet it is incumbent on us all to look at the long term; in this House, we have to be visionary, and this debate gives us chance to do so, and to look at how we can secure a better future, using our resources for future generations.

I respectfully point out that, like many people, I have opposed the severity of Government cuts. I have met people in my office who have come for help and thought that they were deserving of benefits but those benefits have become harder and harder to get. I am sometimes overwhelmed by the cases I come across. It is very hard as an elected representative, no matter which party
Members belong to and whatever their views, not to become perturbed and emotional about those cases. When I see people who should be on benefits, whose medical conditions are being made 10 times worse because there is no alternative than to work, I think, “No, we cannot sustain the cuts.” I stand by that belief. I stand by the fact that our front-line medical staff and emergency services need investment to sustain services. I stand by the belief that we need an Army that is capable of dealing with international commitments. All those things need to be in place.

Achieving all that and still cutting the deficit is incredibly hard to imagine, yet it can and must be done. Looking at the situation and saying that we need to invest in our future with a portion of the money is even more difficult, and that is why we are having this debate. Perhaps the national insurance contributions that the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber referred to can kick-start the fund.

We expect people to budget with their money at home in exactly the same way. People must pay for a secure home with a mortgage, which should be paid off in some 30 years of work. People must pay their tax and national insurance to ensure healthcare and future security. On top of that, we ask people to pay into a compulsory private pension fund set up by their employer, and they must then live off the returns from that money. That is what we all must do in this place: we must keep all the balls in the air, as we expect our constituents to, while living a normal life. We must pay our mortgage—the deficit—at a rate that enables us to meet the rest of our obligations. Many young couples out there would love a 15-year mortgage, but it is not possible to pay that and live daily. As my mother says, “You cut your cloth to suit your needs.” We must pay off what we can afford to, and continue to spend money on what we must not neglect.

The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare said in his paper on the sovereign wealth fund:

“We can and should start doing this immediately, because it is the only kind of Government spending which can justifiably be paid for with long term debt. It will inevitably mean a slightly longer wait to eliminate the Government deficit and achieve a balanced budget, but should earn a good financial return through higher economic growth nonetheless.”

I agree, and we should consider that. It is a difficult, but not impossible, task. We are elected to take difficult decisions in this House and to ensure that they are the right ones. That is why this debate is so helpful.

At the very least, the proposals merit full Government scrutiny and consideration. A committee should be set up to do this work and to see how the Government can invest now to help future generations. I think of Katie and Mia, my wee granddaughters—most of us probably have grandchildren—and I would give them the world, if only it were mine to give them. We would all do that for our children and grandchildren. We have an obligation to the generations ahead to do the right thing, to make the tough choices now and to secure a better future for them than seems to be on the horizon. The work needs to be done, and the hon. Gentleman has started it with this debate. We now need seriously to consider in this place how to do that. The Minister will lead on this issue, so there is no pressure on him whatever. We look to him genuinely and seriously for guidance on how best we can fulfil our obligations as MPs, and—I do not mean to sound like Trump—on how to make sure that we keep Great Britain great.

10.8 am

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise to the Front Benchers: because of other commitments, I will have to read their responses to my contribution and others in Hansard.

I want simply to re-emphasise the proposal that the Co-operative party floated some three years ago: that the Crown Estate, which holds some £8.6 billion of land and property, should have changes made to its regulations to allow it to invest overseas and so essentially become the beginning of a sovereign wealth fund. It is appropriate to have a degree of realism about the size of other sovereign wealth funds and, therefore, about the task for a future Government who want to set one up. As others have suggested, one has to start somewhere if one thinks a sovereign wealth fund is a good idea.

For all intents and purposes, the Crown Estate acts like a sovereign wealth fund by investing in property—usually retail centres—and paying the surplus it generates back to the Treasury to help offset the costs of our royal family. We should encourage the Crown Estate to be a little more ambitious by lifting the restriction that says it can invest only in UK assets and by allowing it to invest in assets overseas, as other sovereign wealth funds do. The Crown Estate clearly has a track record of expertise in the retail sector, and one might therefore expect it to continue with that approach. I see no reason for the Crown Estate not being allowed to contemplate, under the Treasury’s watchful eye, investment in similar ventures overseas. The Crown Estate could then hopefully generate sufficient surplus not only to pay for the royal family, but to invest in the types of infrastructure projects that all Members want to see.

The Crown Estate has a comparatively smaller asset base than the funds held by Norway and a number of middle eastern countries. Nevertheless, I see no reason for not advocating a more ambitious strategy, with the hope and aspiration that the Crown Estate might begin to become a sovereign wealth fund. I have had no clear explanation from the Treasury of why it opposes changing the law to lift the restrictions that limit the Crown Estate’s investments to the UK market. I hope that the Minister—if not in this debate, then perhaps by way of letter—will think about that, because if the restriction were lifted, the Crown Estate would begin to act like a sovereign wealth fund.

George Kerevan: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that some of the Treasury’s reservations might be overcome if we followed the Norwegian example and had limits for classes of investment that a sovereign wealth fund could make? If we went down the route of investing in foreign equities or bonds, only a proportion of that investment would then qualify for the overall fund.

Mr Thomas: That is a helpful suggestion. If the Treasury could be persuaded to allow the Crown Estate to dip its toe in overseas markets, it might initially restrict how and where, and in what type of assets, the Crown Estate invests. The hon. Gentleman, cautious Scot as he clearly is, might wish to encourage the
Treasury both to be open-minded about investment overseas and to carefully restrict such investment. I do not oppose such a restriction if it allows the Crown Estate to be a little more imaginative.

With that pithy contribution, I encourage the Minister and my Front-Bench colleague to embrace the Co-op idea with enthusiasm and consider how we might begin a UK sovereign wealth fund.

10.14 am

**George Kerevan** (East Lothian) (SNP): I begin in time-honoured fashion by thanking the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) for securing this debate. I say that genuinely because we do not get enough chance to think long term or to debate issues in detail, and this is a practical issue on which to do so.

This has been a limited debate, and I begin my summimg up by agreeing with many of the hon. Gentleman’s reasons for having some kind of sovereign wealth fund. In the current context, the most important reason is that a sovereign wealth fund would provide inter-generational justice. There have been discussions about a UK sovereign wealth fund since the 1970s; the issue has come and gone. There have been many arguments for a sovereign wealth fund and, in the ’70s, the North sea oil money had arrived and we needed to do something sensible with it.

Such reasons are episodic. On both sides of the House, we have all come to understand that inter-generational fairness is an issue. Successive generations have repeatedly used up available funds, often making a mess of the economic situation, and left it to future generations to pick up the pieces, as the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign is at the moment.

In the absence of any inter-generational mechanism for creating such fairness, we have to consider some kind of sovereign wealth fund. The Government are on record as seeking some form of inter-generational justice, and this is the only mechanism currently under discussion that has any chance of success. Without prejudging how we do it, a sovereign wealth fund is worthy of discussion because it exactly fits the kind of programme that the Government have suggested.

The hon. Gentleman did not examine in any great detail the other argument for some kind of sovereign wealth fund. During a periodic economic crisis, a sovereign wealth fund, provided we do not touch the capital, would give us an emergency revenue stream that can be put to use without unbalancing the broader fiscal mix. Since 2008, at the same time as building up the equity base of their sovereign wealth fund, the Norwegians have been able to tap some of the income stream temporarily, to offset lower tax revenues as a result of the global economic crisis. Again, that would seem to recommend itself to the Treasury.

**Ian Blackford:** I applaud what Norway has done, but one of the weaknesses of the Norwegian model is that it invests primarily in equities and bonds. If we get this right, there is an opportunity to invest in infrastructure. My hon. Friend is right that we should draw down only on the income streams, but there is a real opportunity to invest in infrastructure to build capacity and growth opportunities, as well as investing in financial assets.

**George Kerevan:** I could not agree more. I will come on to that, but the Norwegian example is slightly skewed by the fact that Norway is a relatively small country and, when its sovereign wealth fund was being built up, it had an excess of inward investment in the oil industry. Norway therefore did not need to tap the wealth fund for domestic infrastructure expenditure. Norway has also been canny in making significant investment in infrastructure anyway. There is a glaring gap in the UK’s infrastructure investment, and infrastructure would be one of the primary places to secure a positive income stream; it is therefore somewhere we would want to invest.

Just to finish on the Norwegian example, there is never a good time to start a sovereign wealth fund. It is interesting that the Norwegians did not start their wealth fund until the early 1990s, just as oil prices collapsed. They set up a spanking new sovereign wealth fund, and they chose to persevere after oil prices nosedived. Oil revenues built up again during the 1990s and the wealth fund powered away. On whether we should wait and whether there is a right time to start, there is never a right time. The Norwegians started their sovereign wealth fund at the worst possible time for the income streams that they were tapping, namely oil revenues, but they persevered. It is about perseverance and long-term thinking. The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare made the key point that this works only if we think long term.

We must look at some of the counter-arguments, because as enthusiasts we tend to let our ideas run away with us. The fundamental argument that is always made, especially from the Conservative Benches, is “Why should the Government—or some Government agency, even at arm’s length—keep the revenues and invest them? Surely we should cut taxes and let people spend the money themselves, because they are better judges of how to invest for the long term.” It is a compelling argument, but the trouble is that historical experience does not bear it out: look what happened to North sea oil revenues back in the 1970s.

It has not yet been mentioned today that a prototype sovereign wealth fund, in the shape of the National Enterprise Board, was set up in 1975 by the then Labour Government to invest in domestic infrastructure. As I remember, it had £1 billion a year from North sea oil. It began by building up a portfolio of British industrial companies. There was a Scottish equivalent, the Scottish Development Agency. That was all abolished in 1979 when the Conservative Government came in under Margaret Thatcher. The argument was, “Individuals and private companies are better able to spend the money, so why not cut taxes?”

The 1980s were the decade of maximum inflow of funds from North sea oil. What happened to investment in that decade? Industrial investment fell—indeed, by the end of the 1980s, the UK turned out to be one of the lowest spenders on private industrial investment in the OECD. So it did not go into private sector investment; what about public sector investment? We started the 1980s with something like 2% of GDP being spent in net public investment in infrastructure, which is quite good by today’s standards. By the end of the decade, that had been reduced to something like 0.2% of GDP. There was a catastrophic fall in investment throughout the 1980s. Whatever the huge influx was of funds from North sea oil, it was not passed on in investments.
What about tax cuts? I always like to remind Conservative Members that during the 1980s the share of taxation in GDP did not fall. Yes, Mrs Thatcher cut income tax quite considerably, but she counterbalanced that by increasing VAT. The overall tax burden did not fall, so we have to ask where the North sea oil money—the excess revenue for the Treasury of more than £100 billion in that decade, in contemporary terms—went.

In the first half of the 1980s, there was a very serious recession, from which the economy took 18 quarters to recover and which reduced the Treasury’s overall tax income. Essentially, the Treasury made up the loss from that early-1980s Thatcherite recession by using the North sea oil money. In the end, in the 1980s—the peak years of income from North sea oil—the money was wasted. It did not go into private or public infrastructure investment and it was not used by private individuals to expand their savings; it simply went down the drain.

John Penrose: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is not necessarily a choice between tax cuts and a sovereign wealth fund? Potentially, depending on how we use it, we could do both. In some cases, it might make sense to do both, if only because—as the Government have already said in answer to parliamentary questions—we will need to do something to reduce the country’s overall debt burden. All I am arguing is that we should not ignore the liabilities built up in our state pensions and benefit system as part of that burden. We need to address that and we may also want to make tax cuts, but for different reasons, to do with demand stimulation and so on.

George Kerevan: In a spirit of compromise and reaching a consensus that might have an impact on the Treasury, I happily take the hon. Gentleman’s point.

All I am trying to say is that the crude default assumption that taking the money and giving it to individuals or companies will resolve the infrastructure investment problem has historically not proven correct. We come back to the need for some kind of overall public agency that saves and invests. The crude Thatcherite argument, if Members will forgive me for putting it that way, that says “Leave it to the public” is wrong. Short-term pressures on the public and on companies are just as great as those on Governments and Ministers. Somebody somewhere has to create an agency that thinks long term.

Mr Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman’s colleague was a bit snippy about the idea of turning the Crown Estate into such an agency. Could the hon. Gentleman be persuaded to be more positive about the idea?

George Kerevan: I am not sure that I recognise that characterisation of my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). In case it has never been said on the record before, I will say that he was once my student when I lectured in economics—he is younger than he looks—so everything he knows about economics probably came from me. Anyway, I will come on to the Crown Estate in a minute.

What should we spend the money on? I agree with the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) that the Norwegian example of simply investing in foreign equity is too narrow. Given the primary crisis here in the UK, we should impose an injunction on whatever form of wealth fund we create to invest primarily—not totally, because for safety and balance—it should have a remit to spread its portfolio—in infrastructure. The OECD reckons that a baseline of something like 3.5% of GDP should be reinvested in public infrastructure every year to maintain and develop reasonable levels of productivity. In the UK, that investment has fallen to less than 2%. I fully recognise that significant funds for infrastructure investment over the forecast period were announced in the autumn statement, but even so the figure will rise only to about 2.3%, and we need to get up to at least 3.5%, so there is an infrastructure investment gap. The flow of funds could come from a sovereign wealth fund, because above all a sovereign wealth fund can think long term, whereas the City and the financial institutions are being forced to think more and more short term. Again, one of the crucial things we get from a sovereign wealth fund is the ability to think long term rather than just talk about thinking long term.

How would we fund it? I share some of the disquiet about simply linking it to running a budget surplus. Running a budget surplus is extraordinarily difficult; it has rarely been possible to run one over any length of time, in this country or in others. Gordon Brown ran one for a few years at the beginning of the millennium, but it was largely done through artifice because he sold off the gold reserves at rather a bad time. Roy Jenkins, who some Members may be old enough to remember, ran a budget surplus at the end of the 1960s, but only with a hugely draconian austerity programme that actually undercut investment in the long run.

From looking closely at the autumn statement, I do not believe that there is much chance of our running a budget surplus at the end of the forecast period. I certainly agree that we should seek to have a balanced current budget over the medium term, but artificial controls on investment and on borrowing for investment are the wrong way to go. There is no reason not to have quite a healthy borrowing for investment, provided that it is roughly in line with trend growth, because it will make a return. Simply linking the sovereign wealth fund to running a budget surplus is offering a hostage to fortune.

We should therefore look at other sources of funding. The Crown Estate is one—clearly we have assets there that could be deployed. I also remind hon. Members of something that has not yet been mentioned: in the last decade, most of the sovereign wealth funds that have been created, particularly in China, have come from recycling the foreign investment earnings from a trade surplus. It is a bit difficult for the UK, given that we have a trade deficit. Fortunately, in Scotland, where we still have a trade surplus, that surplus would underpin the re-creation of our sovereign wealth fund.

Clearly, this is an idea whose time has come and about which there is broad consensus across the parties. It is also an idea that the Treasury has always been reluctant to think about, but that stems from the short-termism of the Treasury. The new Chancellor has suggested that he wants to think longer term. A sovereign wealth fund would be his chance to prove that that is what he is going to do.
10.30 am

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you very much, Mr Owen, for calling me to speak. It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) for securing a debate on such a genuinely interesting issue: his proposition for a UK sovereign wealth fund. I have read with interest his recent pamphlet for the Social Market Foundation, “The Great Rebalancing”, the ideas he presented have been very much the basis for his speech today. He was kind enough to advertise the paper’s availability for those seeking a late Christmas present for a loved one. However, I can genuinely say that I enjoyed his pamphlet and I enjoyed listening to his speech today.

I do not want to get the hon. Gentleman into any trouble, but I have to say that parts of his speech were very much on board with certain parts of current Labour party economic policy, even if we do not necessarily reach the same conclusion on this issue. However, on separating current and capital spending and balancing day-to-day spending while allowing for long-term investment, we are very much on the same page. I only hope that his Government will listen to him and implement such a sound economic policy, which is rapidly becoming a mainstream consensus position.

The Labour party has been calling for higher levels of Government investment, given that, as the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members outlined, we are investing less as a percentage of GDP than any other comparable developed nation. As the hon. Gentleman writes in his pamphlet: “The result is chronic under-investment relative to other developed nations, and creaking infrastructure which chokes and slows economic growth.”

Frankly, I could not agree more: we are committed to mobilising billions of pounds more for sustainable investment in the UK economy. We want to see £250 billion of direct Government expenditure in key infrastructure projects over the next 10 years and a further £250 billion mobilised through a national investment bank. Labour will deliver the long-term investment the UK economy needs, to boost growth and tax receipts, and to ensure that our welfare and public services can receive the funding they desperately need—today and in the future.

In that way, the public finances will be better placed to respond to the demands of meeting pensions and benefits payments in the long term.

The hon. Gentleman’s idea is for a sovereign wealth fund that would be ring-fenced for pensions and benefits payments. I see some difficulties with that idea. Ring-fencing our pensions and benefits systems to a sovereign wealth fund means using a pot that would vary pro-cyclically to fund a social security system that functions counter-cyclically. In other words, benefits need to be paid out when the economy takes a downward turn, which is when the wealth fund would be at its weakest. Moreover, it seems risky to use a fluctuating fund as a ring-fenced source of public spending that needs to be fairly stable in the long term. What would happen if, at the moment people needed Government support, the wealth fund could not pay out?

The hon. Gentleman wrote in his paper that “Clearly it wouldn’t be generationally fair or just to expect the same people who had just fought a war, or weathered the financial storm of a global financial crisis, to rebuild the financial cushion... within the next few years of a single economic cycle.” However, I feel that an eventuality such as a war could cause exactly that type of situation. We have already seen that the Conservative Government consider it fair for the average UK citizen to pay the price of six years of austerity following a financial crash in which they played no real part, and I am not sure how a sovereign wealth fund would ensure that that could not happen again.

Of course, there are advantages to wealth funds if they are used, for example, to invest in infrastructure projects, which many Members have mentioned. However, countries with effective funds tend to run a budget surplus and, as we are all too aware, the UK does not—and has not done so for some time. Indeed, the last Chancellor missed out on all his deficit reduction targets and did not reach his arbitrary surplus goal, so it is no wonder the new Chancellor has abandoned that goal altogether. I struggle to see now how a fund could be built up, given the pressures on the public finances as they stand.

Overall, though, the concept of a sovereign wealth fund for the UK is definitely one that should be discussed. Other countries around the world have indeed benefited from establishing one, and Norway’s great success is often cited as an example. However, at this stage we do not have a workable proposal about how to build up the necessary reserves, and I would certainly not be happy with people becoming dependent on a fluctuating fund for state support and pensions, as has been advocated. Equally, we need to be realistic about how capable Britain is of building up such a vehicle at this time and about the difference between our circumstances and those in countries that have deployed sovereign wealth funds to their benefit.

However, I thank the hon. Gentleman for allowing us to debate this issue today. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments. I am sure that the idea of a sovereign wealth fund will be debated in more detail in the future.

10.35 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) for securing this debate today. The issues it raises go to the heart of the Government’s economic approach, which is to get our finances in order and to build for the long term-success of the country. I read with great interest my hon. Friend’s paper, produced with the Social Market Foundation; I might indeed consider purchasing it as a small Christmas gift. The objectives that informed his paper are all ones that I share, along with Members on both sides of the House, I am sure: to see the UK’s economy strengthen and grow sustainably in the future.

Let me start by addressing the idea of sovereign wealth funds more generally, because I agree that they can form an important part of any country’s strategy for investing in its future success. Often, they are a way for Governments to manage fiscal surpluses, foreign currency operations or balance of payments surpluses. They can indeed be an effective tool for both planning sustainable investment and managing volatility in receipts. We have seen how they can work well for countries that...
have large fiscal surpluses. Hon. Members have mentioned Norway’s Government pension fund; there is also Saudi Arabia’s Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency’s foreign holdings fund.

However, we are not debating today the valuable role that sovereign wealth funds play in other countries around the world; we are considering whether such a fund would be appropriate for the UK, and—importantly—appropriate at this time. As the House is fully aware, we are not in the same position as many other countries that have elected to set up such funds. The crucial point is that the UK has not run a surplus since the start of this century, although we are now committed to doing so.

We have chosen the path of a credible fiscal policy that will restore our economy for long-term health, and although we are no longer seeking to deliver that surplus in 2019-20, we remain resolved to do so, to bring our public finances into balance. That is why we have committed once again in the autumn statement to deliver the surplus: we set out our plan to make that happen as soon as possible in the next Parliament, while in the interim bringing cyclically adjusted borrowing below 2% by the end of this Parliament, and getting public sector net debt, as a share of GDP, to fall in this Parliament, too.

I share my hon. Friend’s conviction about the need for strong and sustainable public finances for the UK and I understand his interest in exploring the potential for a British sovereign wealth fund. I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that the country should be prepared for a rainy day—sensible advice that we should all listen to. However, given that UK debt will soon be at a 50-year high of 90.2% of GDP, our priority must be to return the public finances to balance and to get the debt falling before we can consider a sovereign wealth fund in more detail. However, although such a fund may not be an appropriate avenue for us to explore at this stage, I will touch on some of the issues that today’s consideration has raised.

One such issue has been our infrastructure. One of the key roles that a sovereign wealth fund can perform is to act as a vehicle to fund sustained investment in infrastructure. Although we may not have a sovereign wealth fund, or even a formal statutory target for the proportion of our GDP that we invest in infrastructure, the Government share my hon. Friend’s conviction about making the infrastructure investments we need that will boost our productivity and strengthen our economy. That is why we have asked the National Infrastructure Commission to make recommendations on the future infrastructure needs of the country.

Once again, I refer all Members to the commitment in the autumn statement, where we prioritised high-value investment in infrastructure and innovation. That included the new national productivity investment fund, with £23 billion of extra spending targeted at high-value projects that will deliver more opportunities and higher living standards for working people—whether that is more homes, better transport links or the 21st-century digital capacity we need.

Ian Blackford: The Minister is setting out why he thinks it is not relevant to set up a sovereign wealth fund today, but does he accept that there was a missed opportunity with the £340 billion bounty that came from North sea oil? That could have been used to establish an oil fund that would have delivered benefits for today and the future.

Simon Kirby: I often say as an MP—I suppose the same is true as a Minister—that it would be nice to have a crystal ball, a magic wand and a time machine. We are where we are, and we have to make the best decisions going forward—rather than looking back in anger, if I may quote the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas).

The additional capital will take public sector net investment to over 4% of GDP for the rest of this Parliament, well above the average of the last 30 years; in real terms, it has been more than 50% higher on average this decade than it was under the whole period of the previous Government.

Another aspect of my hon. Friend’s excellent paper was the suggestion that a new national debt charge be carved out of income tax to help pay down the debt. He will know how much I share his conviction that we need to get debt falling, but I know he also shares the Government’s commitment to helping people who are just about managing. It is important that we build an economy that works for everyone. That is why we would not look to deliver a new income tax charge in our current position. Indeed, as part of the tax lock, we have legislated not to increase the main rates of income tax, national insurance contributions and VAT during this Parliament. Alongside that, we have prioritised an approach to taxation that supports working people, such as our increase in the tax-free personal allowance.

John Penrose: Just to ensure that we are all clear, I clarify that my paper supports what the Minister is describing. The proposal in my paper is that the national debt charge would not start until the budget was in balance and would only equal what we were already going to be paying in debt interest to begin with. I reassure him that I am not suggesting an undercutting or a swerving away from the fiscal rules announced in the autumn statement. Those are essential to get us to the point where the budget is in balance, as he is ably laying out at the moment.

Simon Kirby: I thank my hon. Friend for again demonstrating what a sensible person he is.

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) asked about North sea oil and why we did not create a fund in the past. He knows full well that successive Governments made use of the revenue from North sea oil to support public finances in the years when the revenues rose. I can tell him that going forward from April 2017, his Scottish Government will have the powers to contribute to their own reserve fund if they so wish. Perhaps that is something they might consider. We all agree that investment in infrastructure is key to growing the economy. That is why the extra £23.7 billion announced in the autumn statement is important; it takes the total we are spending to £170 billion during this Parliament. That will improve productivity, increase living standards and be an essential part of our plan going forward.
George Kerevan: About half of the extra £23 billion that the autumn statement has put into infrastructure investment is going into housing. How does that raise productivity?

Simon Kirby: Housing does raise productivity. It is a much-needed part of our economy. People need affordable homes to rent or buy. The building process, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, creates jobs and increases prosperity and productivity.

The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned a shale industry would leave a positive legacy for local communities and regions where it is based. The Government’s policy is for those communities to be able to choose to invest the funds for the long term. I thank the hon. Gentleman, as ever, for making a very thoughtful contribution that added greatly to the debate.

The hon. Member for Harrow West apologised for not being able to be present during my speech, and I appreciate that. He asked about lifting investment restrictions on the Crown Estate. That is an interesting idea; I will do as he asked and write back to him on that matter.

I thank the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan), as ever, for his thoughtful contribution. He mentioned inter-generational fairness. I agree that that is an important issue, but at 90% of GDP next year, our debt is just too high. That represents a burden on future generations, and it is important that we retain our focus on our priority of returning the public finances to balance and getting the debt falling. Therefore, it is not possible, and it would not currently be appropriate, for the UK to set up a sovereign wealth fund. He also mentioned taxation levels; I feel duty-bound to remind him that from tomorrow, for the first time, his party—the SNP—will be able to put up taxes in Scotland. The Scottish Government can put their money where their mouth is, if they choose to do so.

John Penrose: The Minister is being generous. I want to pick up on the point he has now made twice: about prioritising the reduction of the overall level of Government debt in the economy once we have eliminated the deficit. I completely applaud that, but does he accept in return that the debt denominated as giltts or as bonds is only part of the overall picture of liabilities that the Government and successive Government have loaded up? A large proportion of the total liabilities—a larger proportion than the actual debt denominated as bonds—is embedded in the state pensions and benefits system. It would be a mistake for any of us to ignore those liabilities. They are equivalent to debt, so at some point we need to face up to the costs that they include, as well as to the ones he is rightly pointing out with the bonds themselves.

Simon Kirby: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, and I accept that the debt is made up of a variety of different things.

I commend my hon. Friend once again for securing the debate, which has been interesting. We have discussed some significant issues for the British economy. There are many areas where he and I are in full agreement, but in closing, I would like to highlight three key aspects.

First, rebalancing our economy is necessary and important. Secondly, dealing with the deficit and getting debt falling is necessary but not sufficient to rebalance the economy. A dynamic and strong economy where growth is shared across all parts of the UK is what we need. Thirdly, on the effectiveness of sovereign wealth funds in various countries, I must repeat our conviction that setting one up is not appropriate for the UK at this point in time when our priority is to get debt falling.

Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare notes in his paper, there is little point in attempting to build up such a fund when debt is at “its current, historically high levels.”

I share my hon. Friend’s desire to live within our means—the hon. Member for Strangford used the expression “to cut our cloth accordingly”—and to secure our public finances, to get debt falling and to invest sensibly in our future success, which are all important areas that represent core priorities for the Government. Those priorities were reflected in the approach that we outlined in last month’s autumn statement: to build an economy that works for everyone.

10.50 am

John Penrose: What a splendid debate. There is a high degree of consensus among all parties, with a few isolated islands holding out against the principle. Much of the debate has been about how we might set up a fund, the competing mechanisms that we might use to build it up, and when we should have started, but there has been widespread agreement that, in principle, such a fund is desirable. Scottish National party Members say they are in favour of the principle of a sovereign wealth fund, but they argued that we should have started it earlier and built it up from oil. None the less, they were in favour.

The voice of Northern Ireland agreed. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said he was brought up to save for a rainy day, as were we all, and he is absolutely right. The hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) brought up the Co-op party’s suggestion—similar but not identical to mine—which was helpful.

Although the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) was kind about my paper, I am not sure that the Labour party and I are at the same point on generational justice; it puts less weight on it than I do, although I reassure him that the fluctuations in the fund that he is worried about need not be fatal, but that is for a longer conversation on another occasion.

The Minister was very helpful in accepting the three questions that I asked. On the need for rebalancing, he was clear about the desirability of making our economy more robust and more sustainable. Is debt repayment sufficient on its own, or do we have to take into account our broader liabilities, to rebalance the economy? The answer to the latter is yes, and the Minister was clear about that. He left the door temptingly open on whether this proposal is the right answer. He was generous in his acknowledgement of the strengths and benefits of sovereign wealth funds around the world. He rightly says, as my proposal acknowledges, that it would be wrong to start such a thing now. He leaves the door temptingly ajar, so that it might be something we should consider in future, but I understand that he cannot commit Her Majesty’s Government to this at this point. However, that gives us

plenty of opportunity, on a cross-party basis, to come back to this and make sure that that chink of light is brought into full focus.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the UK Sovereign Wealth Fund.

A-level Archaeology

10.53 am

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of A-level archaeology.

First, I declare an interest, having studied archaeology at university. I have hacked through jungles in pursuit of Mayan pyramid sites and spent wet summers in duffel coats digging up Roman forts on Hadrian’s wall. I started such practices at the age of seven on a Saxon homestead on a windy hillside in Sussex. I am chairman of the all-party groups for archaeology and for the British Museum, and a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

I want to put on record my thanks to Dr Mike Heyworth of the Council for British Archaeology, who provides the secretariat for the all-party group on archaeology and has provided very useful information for today’s debate.

The subject of the debate may seem somewhat niche, although I am sure it does not seem so to you, Mr Owen, but it is important. If nothing is done, the current cohort of students studying archaeology in our schools and colleges will be the last. We have already lost the GCSE in archaeology. I studied AO-level archaeology all those years ago. Those days are long since gone, because in October, the AQA examination board, the last board offering archaeology at A-level, announced that after a lot of consideration it had made the difficult decision to discontinue, from September 2017, its work creating new AS and A-level qualifications in archaeology, classical civilisation, history of art and statistics. That is despite the fact that in 2016 more than 600 candidates sat the AS exams in archaeology and 369 sat the A-level. The number has been fairly consistent over the past five years.

On its website, AQA describes archaeology as “one of the most exciting subjects in the curriculum. It is the ultimate subject for an ‘all-round’ student, in that it combines elements of many other academic disciplines, such as Science, Art, Technology, Geography, History, Sociology and Religious Studies. The study of Archaeology challenges students to understand and use a range of evidence to draw substantiated conclusions and raises their awareness of the uncertainty of knowledge.”

Indeed, it is one of the most exciting, challenging and stretching subjects in the curriculum. Far from scrapping it, we should be promoting and expanding it to more schools and more students, particularly in the state sector.

Archaeology is not some dusty, crusty, outdated subject for eccentric fossils like me. It teaches us about who we are, where we come from, where we can go, and how we relate to those around us. As the great Roman republican senator, consul and historian, Cicero, said, to be ignorant of what happened before one was born is to remain always a child.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): On that point, will my hon. Friend give way?

Tim Loughton: On the point of Cicero, I am delighted to have an intervention.

Alex Chalk: We will have some Ciceronian advocacy. Archaeology ought not to be seen as a poor cousin of history. All the reasons to study history apply in equal measure to archaeology.
Archaeology teaches us the disciplines of forensic analysis; how to peel back the layers of evidence, literally; how to contextualise and study the data in physical form—or, often, as importantly, its absence in physical form—and to make assumptions based on scientific analysis. In a contemporary context, those same disciplines were brought to bear in the Shoreham air show tragedy in my constituency last year, when expert archaeologists were brought in to help in the grim but necessary job of identifying remains. There are many everyday applications for archaeologists in police, crime and detective work.

From archaeology, we learn a lot about our environment and the relationship between man and our landscape. We learn about why a bronze-age settlement was built on the side of the downs, for example, and about the relationship with sources of water and the preservation of scarce resources. How were the Romans able to keep food fresh and preserved without electricity and refrigeration? How did the Mayans build pyramids that mirrored the cosmos with the most accurate charts and calendars until the invention of the modern computer? How did the Greeks build such magnificent temples without JCBs and machines? They can all teach us a lot about recycling, respecting and conserving resources, and working in partnership with nature when food miles were scarce and expensive.

There are numerous examples of how archaeology has helped modern civilisation, such as the rediscovering of the Roman irrigation system in Libya to provide water for sustainable agriculture today. From archaeology we can learn about our society at a national and local level; what binds us together across generations; and where archaeological and heritage projects can be a major tool for regeneration and education, especially in deprived communities. Archaeology is a major driver of the economy, not only as a source of visitor attractions and because of its contribution to tourism, but as a serious employer in many sectors, too.

Heritage tourism in this country generated some £20.2 billion gross value added last year and is responsible for 86,000 jobs. The British Museum is the No.1 visited attraction in the United Kingdom, with more than 7 million visitors. It is the world’s greatest museum—a museum of and for the world and the culture of mankind on this planet. There is a contribution, too, from marine archaeology, through famous wrecks such as the Mary Rose, which attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors to Portsmouth.

In the creative arts, the stories, films and programmes about the treasures of Tutankhamun and Howard Carter, the documentaries on Egypt and the more fanciful adventures of Indiana Jones, for example, are all linked to archaeology. In Syria, there are horrific scenes of man’s inhumanity to man, but more attention was given to the tragedy because of the destruction of archaeological treasures and UNESCO world heritage sites, such as the magnificent Palmyra, which I was privileged to visit when it was safe to do so.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): My hon. Friend refers to the jobs created in the heritage sector. I am grateful to Dr John Davey, the lab manager for archaeology at the University of Exeter. He told me that 55.3% of those employed in this area are aged 45-55 years. Does my hon. Friend agree that that shows the importance of continuing A-level archaeology to recruit the people we will need in future to replace those retiring?

Historic England has said that it is “concerned to hear that archaeology will no longer be an option at A-level. We anticipate growing demand for archaeologists trained to handle the large number of excavations likely to be needed in advance of housing development and major infrastructure projects. So we need to be encouraging the development of archaeological skills, and broadening the appeal of archaeology as a discipline. This move will close off a small but significant route into the profession. To address the situation we are working with universities and other organisations to promote archaeology apprenticeships and vocational training to offer potential new routes into the profession.”

Professor Carenza Lewis of the University of Lincoln and of “Time Team” fame notes that archaeology develops a range of transferable knowledge and skills, such as credible thinking, structured working, reflective learning, report writing, team working, verbal communication and citizenship, and that a lack of those skills often disadvantages students, particularly those from less affluent backgrounds, when they attempt to continue their education or enter the workplace. I say “hear, hear” to that. I could add a whole list of disciplines involving the environment, sustainability, culture, regeneration and heritage.

Archaeology is also a major source of volunteering. In 1985, the Council for British Archaeology calculated that there were something like 100,000 archaeological volunteers across the country, spread between about 450 societies. By 2010, that had grown to 215,000, across 2,030 organised archaeological groups and societies. Dr Daniel Boatright, who teaches archaeology A-level at Worcester Sixth Form College and started a petition that has so far attracted 13,261 signatures, says:

“Specialist A-levels like archaeology are vital tools in sparking students’ interest in learning and in preparing vital skills for use when they go on to university courses. AQA is extremely naïve if it believes UK students will benefit from a curriculum of only the
major subjects. What we will be most sorry to lose is a subject capable of bringing out talent and potential in students that might have been left undiscovered.”

He is absolutely right.

Why is archaeology A-level so integrally important? Nearly three quarters of students who study A-level archaeology go on to study it at university, from where many of our archaeology professionals come. That route to jobs will now be cut off.

It is clear that this decision by AQA is hasty and ill-thought-through. It was announced without any discussion with anyone in archaeology or anyone associated with the delivery of the A-level or its redevelopment. It came out of the blue, apparently flying in the face of the archaeological community, which is and has been ready to offer additional support and publicity for the new qualification and has already undertaken research on what is needed. A lot of hard work has already taken place in expectation that the archaeology A-level would be revamped, reinvigorated, grown and promoted. As the Council for British Archaeology said, the archaeology profession has been developing Government-approved apprenticeships, which are due to be launched in 2017. Together with A-level archaeology, they would have offered an important alternative pathway into the profession at a time when there is a growth in demand for archaeologists linked with large infrastructure projects. I want to pay tribute to the good work done by the Department for Education in promoting the Heritage Schools project to bring archaeologists and other experts into schools.

AQA has given three main reasons for its decision to discontinue the qualification: the complexity of the syllabus means that there is a lack of specialists to act as markers; there are declining numbers coming forward to study the subject, although they have been fairly constant over five years; and there are difficulties in maintaining a comparative marking system with the degree of optionality available in the specification.

The archaeological community has queried all three points. Feedback from Ofqual had been very positive about the development of the new specification and the progression of the drafts. There is general consensus among examiners and teachers that the new syllabus would reduce complexity; there is a wealth of qualified examiners and teachers; and there are offers of increased support from higher education archaeology academics. People who have applied to become markers of the archaeology A-level are on a waiting list. The necessary specialisms are available in the existing examining group; there has been no attempt by AQA to discuss this with the group, which I think is a great shame. It makes no sense that AQA has dropped the subject at this time.

Alex Chalk: Does my hon. Friend agree that the criticisms or concerns raised by AQA apply just as much to history of art? It made a U-turn on history of art, and therefore it ought to make a U-turn on this as well.

Tim Loughton: It has not made a U-turn on those subjects; they have been taken on by another examination board—I will come to that in a minute—but my hon. Friend makes a valid point.

There has been a glimmer of hope: alternative examination boards have shown an interest, most notably Pearson UK, which has previously come to the rescue of under-appreciated subjects, and which announced earlier this month that it would be taking over the art history and statistics A-levels and GCSEs and A-levels in five minor languages. Yet the archaeology A-level is left to languish unloved. I am encouraged to hear that, after an initial rejection, Pearson UK is meeting a delegation from the CBA, the chair of University Archaeology UK and the chief examiner for AQA A-level archaeology next week.

The archaeological sector has been galvanised into offering considerable support for the development and delivery of the new archaeology A-level specification, with offers from employers, academics, archaeological contractors, teachers, Historic England and assorted professional bodies. The all-party parliamentary group stands ready. Sir Tony Robinson—I am delighted that he is not far from us today—who did so much to inspire a generation of children, including my son, to dig up their garden in the pursuit of the past, as well as all his work with “Time Team”, is also fully behind the campaign. He has described the loss of archaeology A-level as “a barbaric act…. It feels like the Visigoths at the gates of Rome.”

So why is this down to the Government? What do I want the Minister to do? The situation comes about as a result of changes to A-levels under this Government. AQA has said that, prior to its decision, it was fully committed to offering a new A and AS-level in archaeology, accredited by Ofqual, using the subject criteria determined by the Department for Education. It had already put considerable resources into developing those new qualifications, fully intending to offer them from 2017. However, in the process of developing and obtaining accreditation for the new levels, it concluded that the new qualifications developed from the Government’s criteria would be extremely challenging to mark, as the large number and specialist nature of the options created major risk to safely awarding grades. It was in that context that AQA concluded that there were unacceptable awarding delivery risks for the new archaeology A-level.

AQA has signalled that, if it gives up the A-level, it is agreeable to handing over the majority of the specification material that has been developed for the planned archaeology A-level, together with initial comments from Ofqual. It also helpfully agreed to consider continuing to offer the existing specification for a further year to aid a transition to a new examination board and ensure that there is no gap. On 23 November, the Minister replied to me that he was in discussion with other examination boards on this issue. I would like to know what progress has been made. He praised Pearson UK for coming to the rescue of the other A-levels that had been dropped, but curiously not archaeology.

I know that the Minister is an accountant, but surely even he could not fail to be seized by the moment when Howard Carter glimpsed those treasures of Tutankhamun, hidden from human reach for 3,300 years; when Sir Leonard Woolley first came across the Sumerian treasures from the royal tombs at Ur; or when Hiram Bingham first glimpsed that fantastic Mayan city in the sky, Machu Picchu. Surely even the Minister, with his frenzied interest in spreadsheets and profit and loss balance paragraphs,
could not have failed to be enthused and to grab for a four-inch pointing trowel to investigate what lay beneath his feet.

Parliament has a special relationship with archaeology. It was this House that, in 1753, in an Act of Parliament, established the British Museum as a universal museum; it now has 8 million items. Sir Austen Henry Layard, Liberal MP for Amersham from 1852, gave us invaluable archaeological records and some of the first sketches of the ruins at Nineveh, Nimrod and Babylon. Lord Avebury, MP for Maidstone from 1870, rescued Avebury—the largest stone-age site in Britain—invented the terms palaeolithic and neolithic, and drove the Ancient Monuments Protection Act 1882. We have a special relationship with, a special interest in, and a special duty to the archaeological treasures of this country and, indeed, the world.

This is an opportunity for the Minister to prove that he is not a Visigoth. All excavation archaeology is inevitably destructive, but has the legitimate and valuable purpose of adding to the knowledge of man.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Loughton: I am going to finish.

Destroying such a successful route to widening that knowledge is unforgivable and illegitimate. I hope that the Minister will think again.

11.12 am

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on securing this very important debate. I agree with him—I have never seen him as a dusty fossil, and I hope he does not see me as a Visigoth—about the importance of archaeology. It is an important discipline. It connects our present to the past and helps us understand what it means to be human. Anyone who has had the privilege to visit Pompeii or gaze in wonder at the treasures of Sutton Hoo—even an accountant—knows how far archaeology has enriched our cultural heritage and our understanding of the past. It would indeed be a tragedy if our young people were prevented from pursuing archaeology as a career in the future.

Securing a pipeline of students to study archaeology at university, as my hon. Friend did, is clearly very important, but it would be wrong to assume that only students who study the subject at A-level go on to degree-level study. As he knows, archaeology is a broad subject requiring critical analysis and research skills. It covers aspects of art, history, science, sociology and mathematics. Universities look for students who have a range of academic A-levels for entry to their archaeology courses.

For those reasons, and because the archaeology A-level is not widely available, universities do not require an A-level in the subject as a prerequisite for degree-level study. The number of students currently studying the subject at A-level is very low: there were just 340 entries in 2016, of which just 26 were from state-funded schools. Although the Council for British Archaeology has sought to encourage take-up of archaeology A-level, it also advises students who are contemplating a degree in archaeology to consider humanities A-levels, particularly history, geography or geology, and a science A-level where the course follows a science-based route. A knowledge of ancient languages can also be a useful route in many courses.

Those are the subjects that many universities are looking for. A greater focus on those facilitating subjects will ensure that a broad range of high-quality choices are available to A-level students and help them to choose the subject that will open the most doors to top university courses. We have worked with universities and exam boards to develop new A-levels that better prepare students for university study, including in each of those subjects.

In history A-level, students must study topics from a chronological range of at least 200 years, and might, for example, make use of archaeological sources to complete their compulsory, independently researched historical inquiry. In ancient history, students must develop a broad and extensive understanding of the ancient world. They must understand the nature and methods of the analysis and evaluation used to examine historical evidence. In geography and geology, students are now required to have extensive practical field work skills and the analytical knowledge to interpret their findings. Across a range of subjects, our reforms to A-levels will equip students with the knowledge that is essential for undergraduate study.

My hon. Friend raised concerns about AQA’s decision not to develop a new archaeology A-level for teaching from September 2017. I share his disappointment about its decision. I assure hon. Members that, contrary to some media reports, it was not a Government decision; it was taken by AQA itself. Our intention has always been that there should continue to be an A-level in archaeology, which is why we published subject content which they can offer a high-quality qualification and accreditation, it reviewed its position and concluded that grades could be awarded in a safe and fair way, given the small number of students taking the subject and the wide range of options that the qualification would need to offer, which meant that ensuring comparability between students would be difficult.

In this particular case, AQA initially intended to develop a new archaeology A-level, but, having submitted an initial specification to the regulator, Ofqual, for accreditation, it reviewed its position and concluded that it was not able to continue. It explained that the decision was due to concerns about challenges in ensuring that grades could be awarded in a safe and fair way, given the small number of students taking the subject and the wide range of options that the qualification would need to offer, which meant that ensuring comparability between students would be difficult.

Tim Loughton: The points that the Minister is making about archaeology apply also to statistics and history of art, which have been saved. I quoted the problems that AQA cited. Will the Minister acknowledge that there is a problem with AQA and that many people are moving away from it? It did not consult the archaeological community, which offered help on all those problems,
so they could have been addressed. Because it is the only examining authority that still offers archaeology, the future of archaeology is now in peril.

Mr Gibb: I will come to the other A-levels that my hon. Friend refers to in a moment. AQA was also having difficulty recruiting suitable examiners for the qualification. Those challenges also apply to the existing A-level, which AQA offers. It tried for some time to find acceptable solutions, but unfortunately it has not been able to do so.

My hon. Friend asks what action the Government have taken to secure the future of the qualification. As soon as AQA notified us of its decision not to continue to develop A-level archaeology, in addition to, as my hon. Friend said, history of art, classical civilisation and statistics, we opened urgent discussions with the other exam boards to see whether they were willing to offer those subjects.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, discussions with the exam board Pearson were positive. On 1 December, in a written statement, I announced that Pearson is to develop A-levels in history of art and statistics. Classical civilisation has already been developed by another exam board, OCR, and the specification has been accredited, so the A-level is available for schools to teach from next September.

Unfortunately, no exam board has been willing to develop a new A-level in archaeology for teaching from 2017. Other boards felt unable to overcome the challenges identified by AQA in relation to that particular qualification. The A-level will therefore no longer be available for students starting courses from September 2017. The option for any exam board to develop an A-level in archaeology, however, will remain open. I reassure my hon. Friend that students studying archaeology A-level now, for examination in 2017 and 2018, are not affected by AQA’s decision. They may continue to study the subject and take the qualification.

My hon. Friend also expressed the concern that, were students no longer able to study archaeology A-level, they would not have the opportunity to be introduced to archaeology as a discipline or be encouraged to take the subject further. I disagree with that analysis. Recent archaeological finds such as that of Richard III and the site at Must Farm, with the wide coverage they received, can only serve to engage and enthuse a new generation of potential archaeologists.

Kirsten Oswald: I am an historian, rather than an archaeologist, and I find myself in agreement with much of what the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said. Does the Minister agree that initiatives such as Dig It! 2017 and the inaugural Scottish archaeology and heritage festival are important in encouraging people to take an interest in archaeology and perhaps pursuing it as a further course of study?

Mr Gibb: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. Such activities, when they receive wide coverage in the media, enthuse people generally to be interested in the subject and young people to consider archaeology as a career.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I apologise for arriving late to the debate. The Minister is showing that of course he is not a Visigoth, or a Goth of any sort. If any Minister can be relied on to protect an important subject, albeit a minority one, it is he. Therefore, and in the light of concerns expressed by people such as the staff, parents and students of Brockenhurst College in my constituency, where archaeology is taught extremely well, will he do his very best to redouble his efforts to persuade another board to take up that important subject?

Mr Gibb: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s kind comments. I suspect that his school, Brockenhurst, must therefore be a major contributor to the 26 A-level archaeology entries of 2016, and I congratulate it on its wide-ranging curriculum. I assure him that I left no stone unturned in my encouragement of other exam boards to adopt the subject, as with the languages with small cohorts—we were successful in persuading Pearson to take up those subjects, too.

It remains open for any board to produce a specification or an offer to take forward archaeology. We published the content because we want the subject to continue. We remain open to any exam boards wanting to set an archaeology A-level.

The changes we have made to the national curriculum will help to provide students with a greater understanding of the subjects that they study, feeding their enthusiasm for further study. In history, students are now required to have greater chronological understanding through the study of a wider range of historical periods, including more than one ancient civilisation. Enrichment activities, such as battlefield tours of the western front, in which 1,400 schools have participated to date, have enabled students to gain a deeper understanding of, and develop an interest in, significant historical periods.

Many universities will expect students to arrive already having had work or volunteering experience in museums or heritage sites, or having had practical experience in the field, where possible. Organisations such as the Council for British Archaeology, which runs almost 70 Young Archaeologists’ Club branches all over the UK, and industry magazines such as Current Archaeology offer a wealth of volunteering opportunities around the country.

I hope that I have been able to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham that the Government are fully committed—

Tim Loughton: The Minister and I have been in this place a long time. With great respect, if he says that he really has left no stone unturned in pursuit of an alternative, he would not make a good archaeologist. Can the Minister honestly say that he has gone to every examination board and made a case as strongly as has clearly been made for those other subjects rescued and saved by Pearson and that he really thinks nothing further can be done? If so, that will come as a huge blow to many people in the archaeology community in this country, and in years to come, his colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government will find their plans for infrastructure projects seriously thwarted because he has not been able to produce trained archaeologists to do that vital job.
Mr Gibb: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s words, but with respect the absence of an A-level does not prevent students from taking the subject at university. As I explained earlier, universities are looking for a range of A-level subjects for entry into the degree subject. That is where his focus should be: on encouraging more young people to study archaeology at university.

We did leave no stone unturned. The exam boards have been facing financial issues to do with the cost of running examinations, and both OCR and AQA have dropped a range of subjects. Thanks to the work of Department for Education officials, we have managed to persuade Pearson to take on a number of subjects despite their small cohorts and the fact that they will not be lucrative for the exam board to pursue. We have to be realistic.

As I said, even now if an exam board came forward with an offer to continue to develop a new archaeology A-level, the Department would be responsive—our intention was not that the subject should be dropped at A-level. I am as disappointed as my hon. Friend about the decision, the root of which, however, is the low numbers who have been taking the subject in recent years: down to 26 in state-funded schools and 340 across the piece, compared with more than 80,000 taking the single most popular A-level, maths. That is the degree of difference between archaeology and the more popular subjects.

I hope that I have explained that the Government share the concerns about AQA’s decision to withdraw from archaeology, but I am confident that our wider A-level reforms will equip students with the knowledge, skills and drive that they need to succeed, whatever their chosen field.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the future of A-level archaeology.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.
become ready for work, gives an opportunity for people to gain new qualifications and finds paid positions for some.

Thousands of apprenticeships throughout Wales also rely on the EU and could be affected by our exit. The European Alliance for Apprenticeships, launched in July 2013, works closely with the Welsh Government to strengthen the quality, supply and image of apprenticeships. The alliance has been pivotal in securing and promoting opportunities throughout Wales.

Other consequences could include Britain leaving the single market or ending freedom of movement, which could affect businesses in Wales. Welsh universities, and the businesses reliant on them, would be particularly impacted by the end of freedom of movement. Each year more than 7,000 EU students enrol at universities throughout Wales. Were the Government to clarify their desired future migration arrangements, universities and associated businesses could plan accordingly. As things stand, the Government have given no clear indication of whether restrictions will be applied and the enrolment of EU students will decrease once we have left the European Union.

When this House debates the effect of exiting the EU, we sometimes allow the discussion to slip away from the reality on the ground, but I want to focus on the real impact that exiting the EU will have on one business in my constituency. It is one of the UK’s leading manufacturers in its industry. It has asked to remain anonymous, but kindly told me its concerns about the future, which I will share with the House. Its business is already being impacted by a downturn in construction activity and sizeable currency fluctuations. It tells me that the scale of potential change is vast, and that if widespread change materialises, the implications for resources and productivity are significant. For that industry-leading business, the level of uncertainty is of serious concern and must be addressed urgently.

This business employs people throughout the UK, not only in my constituency. It needs clarity on the form of Brexit, and it needs a plan. Specifically, it needs to know whether the Government plan to stay in the single market and the customs union. It tells me that it needs a commitment to ensure that Britain can secure the right skills in the workforce. It also needs assurances that other policy voids, such as the one on energy efficiency, will be filled.

The bottom line is that business in Wales is crying out for a Brexit plan for Wales. When the UK leaves the EU in March 2019, in all likelihood the engine of Welsh business will not break down, but if the Government do not plan, it will slowly lose fuel and industries will come to a halt. Wales needs not a red, white and blue Brexit, as the Prime Minister suggested, but a comprehensive strategy to deliver the most secure outcome. Vague platitudes from the Government mean nothing and serve only to distract from the fact that, as things stand, we are being led into the night without a torch.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that Norgine, a Dutch pharmaceutical company with a manufacturing facility in Hengoed, speaks for many businesses in Wales when it states that it wants a very soft Brexit?

Chris Elmore: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I am getting that constantly from businesses in my constituency. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, has asked the Government 170 questions on how the UK will be shaped after we have left. To minimise that, I will ask the Government only three simple questions about the effect of exiting the EU on businesses in Wales. Will the Government guarantee to replace post-2020 EU funding that has not yet been underwritten by the Treasury? What steps will be taken to ensure that there is not a training shortage in Wales once we have left the EU? How will the Government involve business in Wales in their EU negotiations, and in representations made by the Secretary of State for International Trade?

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): May I add a fourth question to my hon. Friend’s helpful list of three? Will the Government come clean on whether deals have been done with companies such as Nissan in the north-east? In my constituency and that of my hon. Friend, the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), we have a large number of car manufacturers. For example, Vauxhall, although in England, and Toyota employ my constituents and those of my hon. Friend. Will they, and I depend on access to the single market.

Chris Elmore: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. In addition, the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who could not attend today, includes the Ford plant that borders my constituency, and I would ask for similar guarantees on the automotive industry, because it has a direct effect in Ogmore.

I will be surprised if the Minister answers any of my questions, but I will conclude with a warning. Leaving the EU will inevitably have an effect on businesses in Wales, but the uncertainty that the Government have created is completely unnecessary. The Government need a plan for businesses in Wales, which they need to announce to the House for the attention of businesses in all our constituencies. The EU is embedded in businesses throughout Wales, and it contributes to funding, training and opportunity.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The focus is often on the big primes—my constituency has Airbus and Toyota—but I am particularly worried about the supply chain, especially if it supplies other parts of a business in Europe. In that case, companies might think that they are better placed there and relocate there, which would cause massive harm to all our areas.

Chris Elmore: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I am getting that constantly from small businesses, not only in my constituency but across the piece, living as I do in south Wales.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Do my hon. Friend and the Minister agree that there should be a level playing field? If certain motor companies are selected for special subsidies through under-the-table deals, that discriminates against other companies, whether they are big, like Airbus, or smaller suppliers. We need
support for all exporters and subsidiary suppliers that will be confronted by tariffs, so that they can continue to compete effectively.

Chris Elmore: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which the Minister heard. My hon. Friend is right to make the point that we need a fair playing field for all businesses across Wales and, indeed, the UK.

The opportunities that the EU offers will be sorely missed if the Government do not create better circumstances for businesses in a post-EU Wales. Businesses in Wales are clear that they are willing to adapt to a post-Brexit Britain, but they need certainty and assurances from the Government about what that will look like. As Members of Parliament, it is our duty to go back to our constituencies and tell businesses what they can anticipate from Parliament and the Government in the near future, but I cannot give them any assurances because this House has not been given any by the Government. I am not asking for a running commentary—I leave that privilege to the Foreign Secretary—and I am not hoping for a line-by-line strategy; I am asking only for a few select assurances, so that business in Wales can begin to plan.

I ask again: will the Government guarantee to replace the cumulative £2.7 billion post-2020 EU funding that has not been underwritten by the Treasury? What steps will be taken to ensure that there is not a training shortage in Wales? How will the Government involve businesses in Wales in their EU negotiations and representations made by the Secretary of State for International Trade? I suspect that the Government are unable to provide any answers, and I can only assume that is because they do not have any.

2.41 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to be here today with you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. I represent a successful manufacturing and exporting constituency with many businesses that export both to and outside the European Union. The terms of trade that apply when those businesses deal with customers from outside the UK are extremely important for their day-to-day planning. As anyone who has run a business knows, certainty is precious and fundamental to the ease of running any business, but the one thing that we lack as far as terms of trade are concerned is certainty. That is a fundamental barrier to running a business in the UK with ease. The Opposition will therefore continue to press the Government to provide more certainty for businesses, so they can start to plan for an imminent massive change.

That change is not just about terms of trade; the regulatory mechanisms that apply to any modern business and its area of operation are also vital. The automotive sector has already been referred to. When I was the automotive Minister, it was important that we had clear environmental regulatory standards that were agreed internationally, because the automotive sector operates internationally. Some people talk about “quickie divorces,” but those will not help businesses that need to plan ahead—to develop new cars to new environmental standards, for example. The international environmental standards that will apply need to be made clear to businesses, but at the moment we have no idea what the mechanism for establishing such standards will be in a post-EU world.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Does that not mean that certainty for businesses in Wales and across the United Kingdom will be conditional on a commitment to a transitional arrangement? We must not have a situation where the article 50 negotiations come to an end in 2019 and we fall off a cliff edge, because that would cause so much uncertainty, not just about tariffs but about the regulatory environment to which my hon. Friend refers.

Ian C. Lucas: Indeed. It seems increasingly likely that there will be some kind of transitional phase. I have talked about one set of standards—the environmental standards in the automotive sector—but different regulatory regimes will apply to all sorts of businesses right across the piece. Constructing the mechanisms that will apply to businesses and our relationship with the European Union after we leave will involve a huge amount of work. Regimes will have to be defined for areas such as financial services, broadcasting and pharmaceuticals, and if we are to have all those systems in place, we will need to provide clarity to businesses that are making investment decisions now. Businesses in Wrexham that I represent, such as Wockhardt and Ipsen Biopharm, which are both exporting pharmaceutical companies, need to know what our relationships will be. If they do not, they may begin to reflect on whether the business environment in this country will be as effective, successful and supportive for them in the future.

My objective for post-Brexit Britain and Wales is for the UK to be as close as possible to membership of the single market, while retaining the right to devise and implement immigration policy. If I were negotiating, that is what I would want. I would love the Government to provide that sort of clarity about its negotiating position. It is really important that we have access to the single market. Membership of the EU and the single market has benefited the Wrexham economy hugely—it has become very much an exporting economy—but the lesson of the referendum is that we have failed to manage migration to the UK. I am clear that we must apply a managed migration policy for EU citizens.

Wayne David: Does my hon. Friend accept that there is a need to differentiate between skilled and unskilled labour?

Ian C. Lucas: Absolutely. One of my questions for the Minister is: what migration system will apply to EU citizens? We already have a system in place for citizens from outside the EU, and I imagine that if we jump off the cliff that my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) referred to, EU citizens will, by default, be in the same position as people who come to the UK from outside the EU. However, I have seen reports in the press that the Prime Minister thinks that the points-based immigration system for people from outside the EU that the Labour party introduced when it was in power is not restrictive enough. I would really like clarity on that question from the Government, because we need to have a system in place. In my constituency, we have really important multinational manufacturing businesses such as Kellogg’s and Solvay, whose members of staff travel regularly from mainland Europe to the UK. Those businesses need to know what system will be put in place for them to manage that.
The last report of the Federation of Small Businesses’ UK small business index showed that, for the first time in four years, more businesses were pessimistic than positive about the future. That was the third quarter in a row in which there had been a downturn in confidence. A glimmer of hope is that 55% of the businesses stated they wanted to grow in the coming year, which shows that ambition is still strong. Businesses want to prosper and, of course, they will do that only if they have the nurture they require, which only Government can provide.

Having spoken to various stakeholders in my constituency, it is clear that the certainty and stability of the UK market has taken a hit. They are very much alert to the fact that the forthcoming negotiations will have long-term implications across the country. The Federation of German Industry in the UK, which represents German companies in the UK, has representatives in my constituency who are particularly concerned about the loss of confidence in the UK market. Among those companies, CeKa, long-established in Pwllheli, has expressed clear apprehension about the volatile exchange rate. It is also concerned about cost increases from possible new tariff and non-tariff barriers. The Government should be doing all they can to mitigate those uncertainties now. We could achieve that by remaining part of the single market and customs union.

SMEs are the backbone of the Welsh economy and, with the right support, they can be adaptable, responsive and resilient. When handled well, they have every potential to flourish as one of our most important assets in Wales. We need to put a support framework in place now and do everything we can to help them weather the storm.

Continuing with the German theme, Plaid Cymru has long emphasised the need for a Welsh “Mittelstand”—that is the term used to describe indigenous medium-sized firms in German-speaking countries. Such companies are locally grounded but successful exporters, with strong brands in specialised niches and with long-term growth potential. They characterise one of the strongest and most resilient global economies.

Another area of concern for a company in my constituency, which is of substantial significance to the local economy, is the uncertainty surrounding that which will replace the rural development programme and, for that matter, the common agricultural policy. South Caernarfon Creameries employs 130 staff and also has 130 suppliers selling Welsh milk from Welsh farms. I emphasise that it collects milk from farms across Wales. As a result, the creamery generates at least £30 million a year for the local economy. It has recently expanded as a result of moneys provided by the EU and is planning on doing so once more. Since the vote to leave the European Union, however, the Government have failed to shed any light on how they intend to compensate for the millions of pounds lost.
Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is interesting to hear how South Caernarfon Creameries, which is of great significance to the rural economy in the hon. Lady’s constituency, has relied on money generated by the EU for expansion. Will she join me in expressing concern about the way in which the common agricultural policy is repatriated and implemented in the eventuality of the UK leaving the EU?

Liz Saville Roberts: I share the hon. Lady’s concern, not least because the National Farmers Union has presented evidence to the Welsh Assembly that indicates that if the money that reaches Wales from the common agricultural policy were to be Barnettised—to go through the Barnett formula—that would result in a 40% decrease in the money reaching Wales.

To return to the creamery issue, we have yet to see any real clarity on how that will be addressed, and that is of considerable importance to anyone involved in agriculture and the rural economy. As we know, Wales is a net beneficiary from the EU to the tune of £79 per individual a year. Businesses must not be left second-guessing where their future lies and how they can plan ahead.

I will refer specifically to business rates. Businesses in Gwynedd have experienced an average increase of 8.9%, which I believe is the second highest after the county of the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), who will address us anon. I join my Assembly colleagues in pressing Labour’s Welsh Government to investigate all available powers to ensure that business rates do not penalise businesses. For example, they could use index business rate multipliers to the consumer prices index rather than the retail prices index; variable multipliers, so that small businesses are not disproportionately taxed; three-yearly revaluations, because Gwynedd waited eight years for its most recent revaluation, which had a considerable impact on the increase; and an equitable valuations appeals process. In addition, I strongly urge the Welsh Labour Government to consider adopting Plaid Cymru’s business rates support scheme, which would be likely to benefit tens of thousands of businesses across Wales.

Ian C. Lucas: I want to make the point that the delay in the revaluation was because of a decision by the UK Conservative Government. It was nothing to do with the Welsh Labour Government.

Liz Saville Roberts: I emphasise that business rates are devolved and that there is great potential for the Welsh Government to use that as a means to support business. Businesses are seeing 100% increases in their business rates valuations under the present arrangements, and that is extremely difficult for them. Plaid Cymru’s scheme would mean that all businesses valued at £15,000 or less would benefit, and those valued at under £10,000 would not pay anything at all. That would be likely to affect 80% of businesses in Wales, and I think some 70,000 would end up paying no business rates at all, which, knowing my local businesses, I am sure would be greatly welcomed.

Businesses are the backbone of the Welsh economy, and with the right support they can be resilient. To enable that, the UK Government need to come clean on their strategy and Labour’s Welsh Government need to use their devolved powers creatively and boldly to do everything to enable Welsh businesses to weather the storm. Every possible safety net must be put in place to mitigate the potentially tempestuously perilous in front of us, and both the UK Government and the Welsh Government should have a plan to ensure the long-term resilience of Wales

2.59 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure as always to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. As has already been said, there is great uncertainty about Brexit among the business fraternity across Wales. If article 50 is, in fact, triggered on 31 March 2017, the remaining EU27 countries will determine the deal that we have to live with, no matter what has been said in this Chamber and elsewhere. There is a natural concern that that deal will be in the interests of those 27 countries and others that are not leaving the EU.

There is the spectre of tariffs. Some people have said there will not be tariffs because we import more than we export. However, only Germany and the Netherlands have a net trade surplus with us, so other countries may have an incentive to impose tariffs. Indeed, German car makers may want to block, for example, Japanese car makers that use Britain as a platform to launch into Europe. Of course, that is why there has been an under-the-table deal with Nissan, which has been referred to, while several other large conglomerates have naturally come forward to ask for money to offset prospective tariffs.

As I said when I intervened, it is particularly important that Welsh businesses and all people relying on exports to the EU have a level playing field and subsidies and support, so that they can continue their terms of trade after Brexit—assuming that Brexit goes ahead. My constituency of Swansea West is part of the wider Swansea Bay city region, where 25,000 people’s jobs involve exporting to Europe. Alongside that, there is obviously a farming community that is helped by the common agricultural policy, which may be under threat, and we also benefit from billions of pounds of convergence funding. I am looking to the Minister to provide assurances on all those things—namely, the level playing field, the matched convergence funding and, indeed, what the farmers may need in CAP.

A big employer in my area is Swansea University, which is an engine and an asset for economic growth. It has now doubled in size with the new bay campus in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). It is a jewel in the crown of engineering research and development capability across Europe, and the problem is that we may not be able to maximise our opportunities of utilising that; it is not only an asset for young people to grow and learn, but for producing innovative products for export.

Stephen Kinnock: The European Investment Bank played a critical role in funding the bay campus, which is indeed one of the jewels in the crown of Welsh higher education. Does my hon. Friend agree that some assurance on how to deal with our exiting from the European Investment Bank is desperately needed from the Government?
Geraint Davies: As my hon. Friend knows, the three primary sources of funding for the bay campus were the European Union, the European Investment Bank and the Welsh Government. We need clarity about those future relationships and future funding. Thank goodness it has actually been built. Clearly, if Brexit had occurred a couple of years ago, we would be in all sorts of problems. We are looking for assurances from the Minister on tie-ups with the network of universities across Europe in the future, on possible funding streams and on support for exports that are driven by innovation from that campus. My hon. Friend knows the campus is linked with Rolls-Royce, Tata and other big manufacturers. The idea was to have an integrated approach to export delivery, and we do not want to put that in jeopardy.

There is great concern among the business community across Wales about the prospective falling consumer demand following Brexit and in the light of the autumn statement, which showed that an extra year of austerity would be inflicted upon us and that Britain’s debt would grow to 90% of GDP. Incidentally, it was half that—45%—when the last Labour Government were in power in 2010. The debt is completely out of control. The Chancellor’s Brexit evaluation is that we will all have to pay an extra £1,000 in future taxes. On top of that, the inflation that has occurred owing to the falling value of the pound is equal to a 5% cut in everybody’s income, which they then cannot spend in local shops and on domestically grown products. There are concerns, and we want reassurance, and the business community wants those assurances without further ado.

Hon. Members may know that my position is that the triggering of article 50 should be delayed until next November, after the French elections in May and the triggering of article 50 should be delayed until next November. People should have the final say on whether it is a good deal or not, for real negotiation up to that point. People should then have the final say on whether it is a good deal or not, with the default position of staying in the EU. In the last round of funding, projects financed through our membership of the European Union across Neath Port Talbot have helped to launch 485 businesses, support 7,300 people into work, create 1,355 jobs, provide 14,870 qualifications and enable close to 5,000 people to complete an EU-funded apprenticeship—all in that county borough alone.

Projects such as £22 million valleys regional park have built the tourism infrastructure of my constituency, and more and more visitors are coming to enjoy the beautiful scenery of Gnoll country park and the industrial heritage of Aberdulais Falls. The regional essential skills scheme has helped thousands of people to acquire the competencies necessary to return to work. Neath Port Talbot has also been a lead partner on the pioneering transitional employment initiative, Workways.

I must pay tribute at this point to the leader of Neath Port Talbot Council, Ali Thomas, who last night announced that he will be standing down after many years of service. In fact, he took over from the previous leader, Derek Vaughan, who went on to become our Labour MEP. They are two great men of Neath.

Stephen Doughty: Does my hon. Friend agree that, even with the prospect of the European Parliament seats for Wales being abolished, Derek Vaughan continues to fight for Wales and for all of us to secure the best deals on European funding for our constituencies?

Christina Rees: I absolutely agree that Degsy, as he is known in Neath, is continuing to fight Wales’s corner. He is vice-chair of the European Parliament’s budgetary control committee, so he has great influence in Europe.

Neath Port Talbot has been the lead partner on the pioneering transitional employment initiative, Workways, which has helped to tackle barriers that prevent individuals from finding or returning to employment by supporting the job search, CV writing and interview skills, and access to training. The Workways project would never have happened without EU structural funds. It received a contribution of £16.7 million towards its overall costs. The scheme is held in such high regard that a second phase has been funded—Workways Plus—which began in April this year and will support at least a further 1,000 people into employment.

Swansea University’s science and innovation campus, the Bay campus, which has had a substantial impact on Neath and the region, simply would not have happened without the £95 million of funding received from the European Union. Derek Vaughan’s legacy before he left
as leader of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council was to make sure that the campus was just inside the council area.

Stephen Kinnock: And the Aberavon constituency.

Christina Rees: And inside the Aberavon constituency, as my hon. Friend points out. Neath Port Talbot is also home to a company called SPECIFIC, which uses coated steel to make world-leading, innovative technologies that produce, store and release energy. SPECIFIC is hugely concerned about leaving Europe, not least because of the essential funding it has received, without which it probably would not exist.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. On the issue of steel, which is at the heart of the SPECIFIC project, the Welsh Government has an action to deliver £8 million that will be spent on reducing energy costs at the Port Talbot plant, and £4 million for skills and training. That is precisely the sort of industrial strategy that we need. By contrast, the UK Government continue to be completely asleep at the wheel.

Christina Rees: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point, with which I agree wholeheartedly. Not only will SPECIFIC lose its funding, but it will lose its potential market: it could sell its innovative products to Europe. Also, 16,000 farmers gain direct subsidies from the common agricultural policy. More than 90% would go bust without continuing subsidies from the UK Government via Europe.

Those examples illustrate direct investment across the public and voluntary sectors, but we must note the derived benefits to the private sector and all forms of business. Projects such as Swansea University’s Bay campus have supported hundreds of local businesses—contractors, subcontractors, cafés, shops, fuel stations and bus companies; the list goes on. Those who have been on an EU-funded training scheme have taken up employment with local businesses, which in turn have benefited from a revitalised, skilled workforce. The businesses that make up our tourism industry have been safeguarded and developed through additional investment in projects that have encouraged visitors to the area, who have been renting accommodation, eating out in restaurants and pubs, and enjoying the activities and facilities run by local businesses.

The triggering of article 50 is a leap into the unknown. Any process or deal on exiting the EU needs full scrutiny. The Government need to be held to account for their decision, whether it is for a hard Brexit or a red, white and blue Brexit. Whichever Brexit we end up with, we need fully to consider the implications of a Britain outside the single market or the customs union. The British Retail Consortium has already suggested that if we rely on World Trade Organisation rules and tariffs, the price of meat will rise by 27%, and of clothing and footwear by 16%. Those are costs that my constituents will have to bear. There is a willingness to get on and make things work, but there are a lot of questions and a lot of uncertainty.

Hearing to all those concerns, I am not prepared to support a blank cheque for the Government in activating article 50, particularly when there is so little information available about the plan. Members may be interested to know that the Brexit Secretary has been speaking to the Brexit Committee while we have been sitting; he has confirmed that no plan will be published until February at the latest, because, apparently, a lot of research and policy work needs to be done. He says there will be a transitional deal only if necessary. That is concerning. When in February? How late? If we are talking about activating article 50 on 31 March, we will not get any clarity on the Government’s plans until very late in February.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): I do not think there is anything new in what the Secretary of State has said. Did not the
Opposition accept the argument that article 50 will be triggered by the end of March on production of a plan before that?

Stephen Doughty: If the Minister checks the voting list, he will see which way I voted on that matter. I am speaking about my own views on this issue and I certainly have a great deal of concern about the lack of information.

Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend also accept that even if we did agree to this last minute plan, whatever it is, once article 50 is triggered the 27 EU countries will decide to give us what they want, not what is in the plan?

Stephen Doughty: I have a great many concerns about the negotiating process, but I want to turn to three areas of particular concern that businesses have raised with me: regional funding, the single market and the situation for universities.

It is worth reflecting, as some colleagues have, on the importance of the scale on which businesses engage in the single market. There are 191,000 jobs dependent on EU trade, and that affects everything from steel to the high-tech products in my constituency; 500 firms in Wales export more than £5 billion annually to other EU member states and 450 firms from other EU member states, located in Wales, employ more than 50,000 people.

Several hon. Members have spoken about funding and I will come on to that, but, without referencing specific names, the sorts of things I have been told about include workers' rights to travel to engage in cross-European projects; contracts, which I mentioned in an intervention; and concerns about research collaboration and major long-term projects being put at risk. The message is very clear that businesses do not want a hard Brexit; if there is to be a Brexit, they want it to be as soft as possible and are particularly concerned about tariffs and access to the single market. Those concerns are constantly raised with me.

Businesses were positive with me about the work that the Welsh Labour Government are doing to try to provide some certainty and optimism in the economy in uncertain times. There is particular praise for the work of the First Minister and Economy Secretary, who went to the United States and Japan to stand up for Welsh businesses and the links that we have with those two markets. Whether it is a case of fighting for funding for the south Wales metro or for other projects, the Welsh Assembly Government are trying to ensure that some positive things happen during the uncertainty.

There is also continued investment in infrastructure projects and building, including a lot going on in Cardiff at the moment. There is the city centre redevelopment; we have plans for new stations; we have an enterprise zone, where there is a lot of investment; and—to give credit—there is some degree of cross-party agreement on a city deal. It is vital that such investment in infrastructure and business should continue, particularly now while there is a lot of uncertainty.

Wayne David: We understand that the Government have given some assurances about the continuation of what would have been European funding. Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the fact that the Government are also talking about changing expenditure priorities?

Stephen Doughty: I do. I have yet to be convinced about the certainty on levels of funding, let alone the sectors. That will be greatly worrying to many in my constituency. It is worth reflecting on what the Office for Budget Responsibility said in the economic and fiscal outlook published in November: that as a result of the referendum decision, the potential output growth will be 2.4 percentage points lower than it would have otherwise been in 2021 without the referendum. As to the impact on Wales, the House of Commons Library briefing mentions that there could be “lower business investment… the impact of a less open economy on productivity… a reduction in investment in research and development” and “costs associated with adjustments to new regulations or new markets”.

There will obviously be costs and changes: how are they to be minimised?

On regional funding, £5 billion for Wales is planned for 2014 to 2020, and potentially £2.7 billion post-2020. I still do not feel that we have had the guarantees from the Treasury. Why does that matter? It matters for specific projects such as the south Wales metro, which is vital for people's ability to get around, do business, get to work and take advantage of opportunities in my constituency and the whole south Wales area.

We might be able to achieve those things in part outside the south Wales metro project. I have supported, for example, the proposals for a St Mellons parkway station, which could be funded by other means. There is a good degree of cross-party agreement about the importance of Network Rail and Department for Transport funding for it. However, fundamentally, the south Wales metro has the potential to be a transformative scheme for the south Wales economy. I am pleased that the First Minister was in Brussels arguing for the £110 million-worth of funding. The European Commission was very clear in saying that it could not comment about what would happen after the UK leaves. Such uncertainty is causing concern, so perhaps the Minister will provide some assurances—particularly about that project, which is so crucial to the economy of south Wales.

I have mentioned concerns about access to the single market, which will affect all businesses. I should be particularly worried if we were to consider putting tariffs on goods produced in Wales. The First Minister has made it clear that that is a red line for him. It would affect industries such as the steel industry in my constituency.

I have spoken many times in this Chamber about companies such as Celsa, based on my patch. It does significant amounts of exporting. It is a European company from Catalonia in Spain and works across the European Union. Forty per cent. of direct sales of British and Welsh steel go to the EU. That is similar to the overall total—41% of total goods exports from Wales go to the EU. What assurances can the Minister give to companies such as Celsa that export so much to the EU, let alone other places? What tariffs might they face in the future? What additional trade restrictions might they face?
We have heard a lot of talk about Airbus, which also has a major facility, Airbus Defence and Space, in a neighbouring constituency to mine, Newport West, where a number of my constituents work. Concerns are being expressed about European collaboration on space projects. High tech is an important growth industry in which the UK has been investing more. I should hate such jobs to be lost from our communities—let alone the wider aerospace industry in south Wales.

I want finally to discuss universities. The total value of future research income to Cardiff University, from the seventh framework programme and Horizon 2020 up to July 2016, was £23.5 million, with further applications in the pipeline of up to £15.7 million; work from the European structural fund was worth £23.6 million, plus a potential £35.2 million of projects in development. Those are significant sums.

To give an idea of the sorts of projects involved, I should say that they include the Cardiff University brain research imaging centre, which is doing pioneering work on dementia, multiple sclerosis and other neurological conditions. We should be proud that that work is going on in our capital city. Many researchers from my constituency work in and around the university. What if such things are to be put at risk? I am hearing a lot of concern from the university sector in my area, from individual workers and universities. What assurances can the Minister give?

Christina Rees: There is uncertainty about whether the excellent Erasmus programme in which students from Wales can study in Europe will continue. It has benefited many students from my constituency, and, I am sure, from across Wales.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point: 18% of Cardiff University’s home undergraduates are defined as internationally mobile—so they have taken part in Erasmus or one of the other types of exchange schemes, often with other European countries. That adds to their value—their opportunities to contribute to the global economy in the future and bring value to the economy in Wales. That is even before we get on to the global economy in the future and bring value to the wider Welsh economy. That adds to their value—their opportunities to contribute to the global economy in the future and bring value to the economy in Wales.

I have outlined three key areas about which concerns have been raised with me. I hope that the Minister will provide some reassurances and guidance for those who have expressed them. It is clear that this is an uncertain time for all involved. I am not happy for the Government to be given a blank cheque over the negotiations. I want to secure the best deal for businesses, individuals and the academic sector in my constituency and Wales.

3.28 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for obtaining the debate, which has been incredibly interesting. The speeches were all notable and it is a vital topic.

I was particularly interested in the speech of the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). It is an extraordinary fact that there is such a lack of strategy and clarity about the UK Government’s plans. Clearly, Scotland voted unequivocally to remain in the EU, and that is our focus, but for our friends in Wales I reflect on the wise words of the hon. Lady, who talked about a tempestuous period before us. Her focus, and that of other hon. Members who spoke, is rightly on securing the best possible outcomes for businesses in Wales. Instead of the clarity that we would want from the UK Government in this context, we continue to hear such phrases as “Brexit means Brexit”, “have your cake and eat it” and “red, white and blue Brexit”. It is like “The Great British Bake Off” or some kind of punchline. It is just not funny; in fact, it is highly irresponsible.

It is quite extraordinary and very disappointing that before negotiations have even begun, the UK Government appear to have given up on retaining membership of the single market. I understand well the concerns that hon. Members have expressed. Small and medium-sized businesses, which the hon. Member for Ogmore talked about, are watching this kind of debate carefully because they are looking and hoping for clarity and reassurance. Although I have the greatest respect for the Minister, I fear he cannot possibly deliver that because essentially there is no plan.

For all the devolved Governments, it is vital that there is real and proper engagement on the EU, for business reasons, social reasons and other reasons across our society. The hon. Member for Ogmore highlighted a business that had already raised concerns about negative impacts and rightly warned that platitudes are simply no substitute for plans. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) spoke of uncertainty among businesses of all sizes about the implications of Brexit. We also heard a sensible question from the hon. Member for Ogmore about whether Welsh businesses will be involved in negotiations. I will wait with bated breath to hear the Minister’s response on that.

There is a significant issue with the involvement of the Scottish Government, demonstrated by our long, unanswered call to the telephone hotline. There is a dearth of real dialogue and opportunity to input. For Wales and Welsh businesses, that attitude—which is in stark contrast with the clear and planned proactive engagement of Scotland’s First Minister—rightly rings alarm bells, as the Brexit vacuum continues. That cannot be more starkly illustrated than by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth’s helpful comment that it is likely to be February before the UK Government publish any plan.

The hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) spoke of the need for certainty, which keeps coming up. Businesses are the backbone of the Welsh economy and can be resilient, with the right support. They undeniably require certainty and clarity, which are simply missing. The UK Government must come clean. We want to hear something from the Minister on the Government’s strategy for exiting the EU. The Welsh Government need to put into place a framework of support to ensure they are doing everything possible to help business weather the storm. It seems that the ideological Brexiteers who are sitting right at the heart of power are preventing us from seeing this plan from the UK Government. All we hear are bull-headed assurances that a land of milk and honey awaits—it does not, and businesses can see that.
The hon. Member for Wrexham described what his Brexit negotiating position would be. His particular focus was on migration. The hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) spoke about skilled migration. I was pleased to hear a mention of universities from the hon. Members for Cardiff South and Penarth and for Croydon Central. Universities have significant concerns. I have had several meetings with representatives of higher education institutions.

Geraint Davies: Although I did have an association with Croydon Central, I am the MP for Swansea West.

Kirsten Oswald: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important intervention.

I have met several university representatives, both before and after 23 June. They express particular concerns about the sustainability of courses and the finance of universities. Those issues would be hugely compounded by the reported UK Government plans in respect of overseas students. That is a huge issue economically, socially and in educational terms, and the UK Government need to get a grip on that.

More generally, all of us here need to be clear on what we mean when we talk about migrants and migration. It is vital that, as politicians, we never leave any doubt in people’s minds about the value we place on people from elsewhere who have chosen to make their homes alongside us. The First Minister of Scotland made that very clear when she spoke about the EU nationals who have chosen to make Scotland their home. She said:

“You remain welcome here. Scotland is your home and your contribution is valued.”

It is undoubtedly the case in Wales, as it is elsewhere in these nations, that people who have come here more recently, as well as longer ago, have made a significant contribution to our society and continue to do so. Specifically, they have contributed to business, including universities, social care, healthcare, small and medium-sized enterprises and big business. All those things are vital to the Welsh economy.

The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd expressed a concern that the UK Government need to act in the best interests of Wales. She emphasised the importance for Wales of single market membership and customs union membership. She also mentioned that the business confidence figure for Wales has fallen, despite the great ambitions of the business community. Business is concerned. She gave a striking example of the potential significant impact on important companies such as South Caernarfon Creameries.

It has been quite challenging for me to sit here today and hear hon. Members try desperately to look on the bright side. There really is not much to look forward to, should we leave the EU. It is no wonder that hon. Members such as the hon. Member for Swansea West seek reassurance. It seems clear to me, as someone who represents a constituency where 74% of people voted to remain, that there are vital benefits to remaining in the EU, as the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) said. She spoke of workers’ rights, which are very important, as well as economic benefits and social protections. I echo those sentiments.

I also highlight the importance of cultural and business benefits, which we could lose if we leave the EU. Some 99% of Welsh businesses are SMEs. The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd emphasised the need to adopt or adapt systems similar to those favoured in Germany to ensure the potential of those businesses is achieved. She is focused on achieving the best deal for Wales, for her constituents and for Welsh business.

My focus is on protecting Scotland’s interests. Of course, our aim to remain in the EU is strong and unequivocal. The UK vote means that Scotland faces being taken out of the EU against our will. That would be unacceptable and democratically unsustainable. Just as the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd focuses on protecting Wales, it is right that my focus and that of my party is on considering and pursuing all possible steps to ensure Scotland’s continuing relationship with the EU.

To conclude, it is essential that we get far more from the UK Government than the limbo, woolly words and clunky slogans we have had so far. For all our businesses, all our communities and all the people living in them, it is essential that the UK Government start to have real, meaningful discussions with the devolved Governments and much more constructive discussions with our friends in Europe.
My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly highlighted the view of Norgine in Hengoed in his constituency and its hope for a soft Brexit. That message is repeated by businesses across Wales.

My hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside highlighted the work that Airbus does, the various plants that it has across Europe and the need for flexibility to travel. When I met Airbus representatives some weeks ago, they talked about workers who may go to European plants for two hours, two days or even two weeks—it is very uncertain, so there is a need for flexibility.

My hon. Friends the Members for Swansea West and for Aberavon highlighted the role that universities play and particularly research and development, the risk to future funding and the uncertainty that that is causing at the moment. My hon. Friend the Member for Neath highlighted the absence of a plan for exiting the EU and the uncertainty that that is causing for business.

Christina Rees: Does my hon. Friend agree that once article 50 is triggered, all the MEPs will be involved in the negotiations because they will have to have a vote at the end of the negotiations to ratify the proposal before it goes to the European Council to be ratified, so it would be fair for all Members of this House to be involved in the negotiations as well?

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. It underlines the position that we are in: we have no direction from the Government. They say that Brexit means Brexit and they are not willing to give a running commentary on what is happening. We understand that up to a point, but we are not asking for a running commentary. As hon. Members know, we are asking for the UK Government’s direction of travel, but unfortunately that has not been forthcoming.

I pay tribute to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth on the work of the Wales MEP Derek Vaughan, who continues to stand up and speak out for Wales. I also agree with my hon. Friend’s comments on the Welsh Government continuing to promote Wales and secure funding for infrastructure projects. We heard just today the announcement about a range of large-scale infrastructure projects taking place across Wales.

The last time that I spoke in a Westminster Hall debate from the Front Bench, I said:

“The Government have a clear and pressing duty to reduce...uncertainty. We have all heard of investment decisions that have been delayed and of businesses that are genuinely worried for their futures. People voted to leave, but they did not vote to damage our economy, so the Government need to step up and set out their plans more clearly to deliver the clarity and business confidence we so badly need.”—[Official Report, 25 October 2016, Vol. 616, c. 40WH.]

I still stand by every word of that today. Despite the time that has passed, neither the Minister nor the Government have done anything to give businesses any clarity or certainty, leaving people, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore so clearly pointed out, in the dark about their futures, their careers and their businesses.

At the recent Welsh questions, my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) quite reasonably asked the Minister:

“Can he tell us whether his officials have made any estimate of how many jobs in Wales will be lost if the UK leaves the single market and what he and his Government are planning to do about it?”

We are elected to Parliament to represent our constituencies and their interests. As the Opposition, it is our democratic duty to scrutinise and challenge the Government. That was not an unfair, partisan or trick question from my hon. Friend. It was asking what assessment the Minister’s Department has made of the biggest issue facing our country since the second world war and what plans the Government have to help mitigate the negative effects. However, the Minister replied:

“I am somewhat disturbed by the hon. Lady’s comments. Time and again, I hear Opposition parties talking down the Welsh economy.”—[Official Report, 30 November 2016, Vol. 617, c. 1509-1510.]

That was not an appropriate response. In fact, it was quite shameful, and it does a disservice to the office that the Minister holds not to engage with that as a genuine question.

If the Government are planning to offer support to protect jobs, businesses in Wales need to know what that package will look like and when it will come. So far, this has been a Government of smoke and mirrors, confusion and obstinacy. Whether through ignorance or incompetence, they will not give a straight answer to the simplest of questions.

Furthermore, in a written question, the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), asked what estimate the Secretary of State has made of the economic value to Wales of the UK’s membership of the single market. However, again, rather than answering the question, which might help to highlight what the impact of a hard Brexit could be on Wales, he said:

“I recognise many businesses in Wales trade with the single market”.

Given the significant impact that the EU exit could have on Wales and, more importantly, the impact that the wrong deal could have on our country, that excuse for an answer is completely unacceptable. Is it asking so much for the Minister to share with us the assessment that he has made of the biggest challenge facing our country? Will he today put on the record the Government’s assessment of the economic value to Wales of the UK’s membership of the single market?

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central also asked at the last Welsh questions whether Ministers would commit to supporting jobs at the Ford plant in Bridgend post 2020 by offering Ford the same post-Brexit guarantee as the Government recently gave its competitor, Nissan. It is vital for the future of that site and the jobs that are linked to it through the supply chain, as we have heard this afternoon, that post Brexit, it is able to operate on the same terms as competitors such as Nissan. In refusing to give guarantees to Ford, the Secretary of State is offering businesses in Wales a worse deal than those in Scotland or Northern Ireland.

We know that because his Cabinet colleagues, the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Northern Ireland, committed at the Dispatch Box to offering the same protections for businesses in their respective countries as those offered to businesses in England. Is Wales getting a worse deal than Northern Ireland and Scotland? If so, can the Minister tell us why? If not, why will he not guarantee...
Ford the same deal as its competitors? It looks like a game of playing favourites. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn highlighted the support needed for industries such as the automotive industry.

Labour Members believe that a modern industrial strategy for Wales should be more than just picking winners from Whitehall. Companies in Wales should get at least the same deal from the Westminster Government as companies in England. If the Minister will not give that commitment to Ford, perhaps he will consider another major company in Wales, one of the biggest employers and investors—Airbus. It, too, needs to know what the future looks like. We need a straight answer from the Minister. Will Airbus get the same deal from the Government as Nissan? Airbus spends £4 billion with suppliers, supporting approximately 110,000 jobs. Millions of pounds and hundreds of thousands of jobs are on the line, so we need answers from the Minister. Will he offer a deal and protect the future of 100,000 jobs in Wales?

I have said this previously, but for the avoidance of doubt I will repeat it. Labour respects the result of the referendum, but we must get the best deal for people and businesses in Wales from the coming negotiations, and we will get that only if the Government provide some clarity on what their strategy is and what businesses can expect. It is essential that the UK Government work closely with the Welsh Government and the other devolved Administrations in preparing for the EU exit. They owe that to the businesses and people of Wales. I look forward to some clarity from the Minister on what he and the Government are doing to provide any reassurance to the people and businesses of Wales.

3.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I, too, extend congratulations to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on securing the debate, and on winning a by-election in Ogmore—a task that was beyond my capacity back in 2002.

This has been a good, detailed debate, but it has been lacking in constructiveness. Its title on the Order Paper is “Effect of exiting the EU on businesses in Wales”, but throughout the debate, an acknowledgement of Wales’s strong position has been sorely lacking. There has been no mention of the fact that, in the past year, Wales has performed extremely well on jobs. On every single measurement of employment, the Welsh performance has been positive, and it has been in the top three of the 12 UK regions and nations. As we debate our exit from the European Union, we are in a strong position, both as regards employment levels and how businesses are performing in Wales. It is a shame that those comments have not been made in this debate.

There has been acknowledgment of the strength of various parts of Welsh industry and of success stories in parts of Wales, but we need to look at the overall performance of the Welsh economy since 2010. Wales’s employment growth has been well above that of the UK as a whole. We have seen unemployment in Wales fall, and I am happy to say that that is because of a constructive relationship between the UK and Welsh Governments. That is something we should hear a bit more about, rather than the scaremongering we hear when people continually ask whether there will be job losses as a result of leaving the European Union.

Wayne David: Does the Minister agree that the most disappointing aspect of this debate has been the absence of a single speech from a Conservative party Member of Parliament for Wales?

Guto Bebb: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Will the Minister take an intervention from me?

Guto Bebb: I will of course give way to my Parliamentary Private Secretary—no, had I better not. Certainly, the debate has been interesting, but hon. Members are well aware that Members have responsibilities in different parts of the House and are in different debates that are going on, and it is unworthy of the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) to try to score that political point.

Going back to the success of the Welsh economy, we need to identify the fact that small businesses are a great part of that success story. Small businesses are growing. Indeed, we have seen the figures that show that small businesses’ growth in turnover in Wales has been among the best in the UK during the past year. The best performing part of the entire UK has been small businesses in Cardiff, which have enjoyed 12% growth in turnover, outpacing the situation in London. I pay tribute to all small businesses in Cardiff that have been part of that success story.

Stephen Doughty: I pay tribute to them, too, as I did in my speech. On the Minister’s earlier comments, to be fair, I did make it very clear that there had been work on the city deal and on the enterprise zone, and that kind of constructive work needs to continue through this period of uncertainty. Does he agree that the very real concerns being raised by a number of businesses in my constituency, despite that growth, are valid and need to be answered?

Guto Bebb: As a Minister in the Wales Office, I fully accept that small businesses have concerns—indeed, all businesses in all sectors of the economy in Wales have concerns—but they also see opportunities, and we have heard precious little on those opportunities in this debate. The Secretary of State for Wales and I have been out dealing with stakeholders regularly—those in the farming industry, the third sector, the university sector and the further education sector; businesses small and large; the Confederation of British Industry; the Institute of Directors; and the Federation of Small Businesses. We have been talking to all those stakeholders. We have been doing that because this change—the decision made by the people of Wales and the United Kingdom to leave the European Union—is huge, so it is imperative that we talk to individuals, businesses and stakeholders who will be affected.

A Government who were arrogant enough to think that they had all the answers are not a Government I would want to be a part of. The fantastic thing about my involvement in the Wales Office since March has
been the opportunity to meet so many stakeholders in Wales and listen to what they want from the decision that was made to leave the European Union.

**Ian C. Lucas:** I am grateful to the Minister for showing his usual courtesy in giving way a great deal. Will he give me an example of one opportunity arising from Brexit that the university sector has told him about?

**Guto Bebb:** The hon. Gentleman asks an important question. I have to respond in the same way as some of the hon. Members who mentioned businesses in their constituency but indicated an unwillingness to name them. I was recently in discussion with a university in Wales that saw huge potential to increase its attractiveness to students from outside the European Union; however, it is not a case of either/or. It wants to attract an increasing number of students from outside the European Union, but it also wants to ensure that it keeps the markets that it has in the European Union. These discussions are wide-ranging, and it is fair to say that the responses that we are getting, even from the further and higher education sector, are not as negative as the hon. Gentleman implies.

**Kirsten Oswald:** It is interesting that the Minister has come to the subject of universities, which I mentioned. Does he care to elaborate on his suggestion that universities do not particularly see this as a negative, because that is contrary to the discussions that I have had with them? Also, will he talk about overseas students and the impact of his Government’s plans for overseas students on universities in Wales, Scotland and elsewhere?

**Guto Bebb:** The whole point of having consultations with universities is to understand their perspective. Their perspective is that, yes, they have concerns about elements of the decision to leave the European Union, but they are not entirely negative. I am not speaking about a single university; between myself and the Secretary of State, we have spoken to most of the higher education system in Wales since the decision to leave the European Union. We have listened to those concerns, but we are also hearing that they see opportunities. More than any sector, the higher education sector is aware that its success and ability to play a full part in the development of cutting-edge technologies, for example, is dependent not only on our membership of the European Union, but on our partnerships with all parts of the world. I argue that the doom and gloom of some people here, when it comes to us no longer being part and parcel of European projects supporting higher education, can be challenged through agreements with states such as Israel. Again, we need to be slightly more constructive when talking about the response.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Guto Bebb:** I have to make progress, because I have only five minutes left. We also need to talk about exports. We are doing extremely well: Wales has doubled its exporting since 1999, which has been a great success, and many people have highlighted the fact that we export some 60% of our products outside the European Union. I welcome the comments about the importance of the city region deals; they are important. I would not want to underestimate the importance of the guarantee given by the Chancellor that European funding will go on until the point at which we leave the European Union. I am grateful that that has been recognised by some Members.

On Wales’s involvement in the negotiations, we should take some comfort from the fact that there is an ongoing engagement process from the Wales Office and across Government. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Secretary of State responsible for foreign investment have been to Wales, so the engagement is there. In addition, cross-Government committees have been set up to ensure that the voices of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly are heard. I have sat on those committees, and I say to the spokesman for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), that the contributions made in those committees by members of the Scottish national Government in Edinburgh have been incredibly constructive and positive. Of course there are differences, but the efforts to create a structure that allows all the Parliaments and nations of the UK to contribute to this discussion are very important.

It is only fair to respond to the questions asked by the hon. Member for Ogmore. It is fair to say that we have offered guarantees on European funding up until the point of exit from the European Union. The questions on funding after our exit from the European Union also relate to what we would qualify for after our exit from the European Union. That still needs to be looked at and considered carefully. I am unable to give any assurances on that issue at this point in time; indeed, it would be irresponsible of me to do so.

I was asked about skills, and there is an issue about that. We have had huge investments from European Union funds to support skills, but it is imperative to highlight that some degree of certainty is offered. In addition, I point the hon. Gentleman to the fantastic agreement between the UK Government and the Welsh Government in ensuring that there is a support structure in place for the apprenticeship levy; I hope that he welcomes that.

Another issue that has been highlighted is the triggering of article 50. Most, but not all, hon. Members on the Opposition Benches have supported the fact that there will be more information provided before we trigger article 50. Obviously, the Labour party has stated that it will support the triggering of article 50, and I welcome that development.

We are moving forward, and a detailed plan will be forthcoming, but it is important to stress again that the reason why we are not providing an ongoing running commentary is that we have an obligation to listen to the views of people in Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom. Hon. Members, especially those sitting on the Opposition Benches, ask for clarity; today I have heard a degree of difference in the calls for membership of the single market. For example, the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) highlighted that there are genuine concerns in his constituency and other parts of north-east Wales about migration. He will be aware that any efforts to deal with that issue would have an impact on our membership of the single market. That is a more subtle response than we have heard from some hon. Members.
Guto Bebb

Finally, on this desperate need for information, I fully accept that businesses in Wales need to know more. However, I share the concerns of the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts); I have had more correspondence relating to business rates than on this specific issue. We have the responsibility to do the right thing. I am confident that we will, and in February more information will be made available.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

4 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

Guto Bebb

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Exiting the EU: Scotland

[Mr George Howarth in the Chair]

4.15 pm

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): It may be helpful if I make it clear at the outset that, as a result of the Division, the proceedings have been pushed back 15 minutes: this debate will conclude at 4.45 pm.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Scotland and the process of the UK leaving the EU.

It is a pleasure to speak here under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

Exactly 174 days ago, 62% of people in Scotland voted to remain in the European Union. We are now about three fifths of the way between the referendum and invoking article 50, so 107 days from now, at most, the Prime Minister intends to trigger—probably irrevocably, although that is subject to some discussion—the process of taking us out of the European Union, despite the fact that 62% of us want to stay in.

Two years after that, we face a spectacle in which the citizens who hold sovereignty over one of the most ancient—indeed, most European—of all nations will face the threat of having our European Union citizenship stripped from us: neither because we wanted to rescind it nor because we broke the rules and it was rescinded by the European Union, but because it was taken from us by the actions of a Government who have never held a majority in Scotland during my lifetime.

There will be some on the Government Benches—there are not many here today, admittedly—and possibly even on the Opposition Benches, whose public response would just be, “Tough! That’s the way things go. If you don’t like it, you just have to lump it,” dismissing Scotland’s concerns out of hand. My advice to them is to think very carefully indeed about how such an attitude is likely to be received north of the border.

With this debate, I am not trying to reopen the argument that was won and lost in ballot boxes the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. I find it strange that, although I have now accepted that certainly England and Wales are leaving the European Union, some hon. Members who represent constituencies in those countries may be trying to prevent that from happening. I respect the will of the people of England and Wales. They have given a mandate and I understand that the Government seek to implement that mandate. However, I ask the Government to accept—even simply to recognise—the fact that no such mandate exists from the people of Scotland or, indeed, the people of Northern Ireland.

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I just wondered whether the hon. Gentleman would remind me of the result of the Scottish independence referendum.

Peter Grant: I am delighted to remind the hon. Gentleman that during the Scottish independence referendum, Ruth Davidson, the leader of the Scottish Conservative party, promised the people of Scotland that a vote for independence would take us out of the
European Union and a vote against independence would guarantee a place in the European Union. I am also delighted to remind him that, in percentage terms, the majority of the people of Scotland who want to stay in the European Union was almost two and a half times bigger than the majority who wanted to stay in the United Kingdom in the Scottish independence referendum.

Just now we are talking about the threat to our membership of the European Union. Other aspects of our constitutional status may well be up for discussion at some other time but, in the limited time available to me now, I will concentrate on the immediate issue, which is respecting the democratic will of the people of Scotland to remain in the European Union.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the hon. Gentleman beforehand to ask whether I could make an intervention. The Scottish fishing sector, like the Northern Ireland fishing sector, voted almost unanimously to leave the EU. It is fed up with the EU telling it what to do, with reduced fishing fleets, imposed quotas and reduced days at sea, and with red tape and bureaucracy strangling our once proud fishing fleets. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, for fishing across Scotland and the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, our leaving the EU cannot happen quickly enough?

Peter Grant: I certainly understand the frustrations of fishermen and women. I have had some dealings with their representatives in Scotland, but I have not had the same discussions with those from other parts of the United Kingdom, so I cannot speak for them at all. We have to remember that the reason why the fishing industry in Scotland lost out through the common fisheries policy is that, as became public many years later, there was a deliberate decision by the UK Government of the day to negotiate away the livelihoods of our fishing communities in return for something that presumably benefited some other community elsewhere.

The hon. Gentleman points to part of the contradiction in the way the European Union operates. Luxembourg, which does not have a fishing fleet for the very good reason that it does not have a coastline, whose population is about the same size as that of Scotland’s capital city, got more votes on adopting the common fisheries policy than Scotland ever had. Regardless of where the European referendum takes us all in the next few years, there are unanswered and unsettled questions about the constitutional status not only of Scotland but of other UK nations in relation to the rest of Europe.

The Government asked the people of the United Kingdom for a mandate on the European Union. They got different mandates from different countries within the UK. That creates a problem—there is no denying that. My concern is how we resolve that problem on behalf of the nation that I call home and that I am here partly to represent.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The concerns in Scotland are the same as those in Northern Ireland, Wales and indeed many local authority areas throughout the UK. However, there are mechanisms: those set up through the Joint Ministerial Council, through the input that Departments in Scotland and Northern Ireland will have in the preparation for negotiations and through the ongoing opportunities for debate in this House and the Exiting the European Union Committee, of which both he and I are members. Do those not give the regions of the United Kingdom the opportunity to ensure that their voices are heard? The important thing is that the Government must respond positively to the concerns raised.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. May I remind Members who have made interventions that the terms of the motion are specifically about Scotland? We should not be trying to develop this into a wide-ranging debate about other parts of the United Kingdom, tempting though I am sure that is.

Peter Grant: Thank you, Mr Howarth. May I just say in response to the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) that the jury is still out on whether the Joint Ministerial Council is worth the paper that its name is written on? We will find out once we see the position adopted by the UK Government and the evidence—or lack of evidence—of any change at all in their stance to take account of the very different demands and needs of the different parts of the United Kingdom.

It would be easy for the Government to carry on and negotiate a settlement that satisfied just their own Back Benchers and their own priorities, but to do so would be to ignore the distinct constitutional identity of Scotland and their party’s own promises to treat Scotland as an equal partner in the Union. It would renege on the Government’s call for Scotland to lead the Union and would ditch forever the respect agenda that they were so keen to promote barely 24 months ago.

To ignore and dismiss out of hand the wishes and the expressly stated decision of the people who hold sovereignty over Scotland and who are sovereign even over this Parliament when it legislates on Scottish matters would certainly please the hard-liners on the Government Benches for a few hours—until they saw how it was received in Scotland. How it would be received in Scotland is not hard to imagine, so I do not need to dwell on that here.

The first argument for giving Scotland its proper place throughout the Brexit process is that it is Scotland’s proper place. If we are truly an equal partner in this Union and an integral part of the United Kingdom, we are entitled to nothing less than equal partnership. We should be an integral part of the most important negotiations that the United Kingdom has undertaken since 1945.

The second argument stems from the Prime Minister’s repeated claims that she will negotiate a deal in the best interests of all the United Kingdom. How can she possibly know what is in the best interests of all the different nations and regions of the United Kingdom? Who is now telling her what is in the best interests of the people of Scotland? Who in the inner circle of the Cabinet will speak up for Scotland’s interests or those of other devolved nations when—not if, but when—they do not coincide with the interests of other parts of the United Kingdom? The Secretaries of State for the devolved nations are not even part of that core decision-making team. How can it be credible for Cabinet Ministers to say that they will negotiate for what they know is in best interests of Scotland, when they are fighting among themselves about what is in the best interests of the United Kingdom?
By contrast, the Scottish Government are pretty clear about what they believe is in the best interests of Scottish people. Their immediate response after the referendum was almost unanimous and supported across party lines in the Scottish Parliament. They have committed to publishing proposals before Christmas that could deliver as much as possible of what is in Scotland’s interests, while still allowing the UK Government to respect and honour the decision made on 23 June. It is sad but not surprising that before anyone even knows what that document will contain, it is already being torn to pieces by the social media trolls—none of whom, I am sure, has any connection with the Conservative party.

I hope that the UK Government will at least take time to examine the Scottish Government’s proposals. I am not insisting that they adopt them in their entirety, but I would like an assurance that at least they will be examined and given the respect that they are due. That really is the least the UK Government can do, given that for months their party leader in Scotland has been screaming demands to know the Scottish Government’s plan for Brexit. Interestingly, I do not remember ever hearing her asking to know her own Government’s plans for the United Kingdom, but maybe that is more her problem than mine.

I have not seen the Scottish Government’s document, but—again, in contrast to the UK Government—they have been clear and consistent in setting out what they believe Scotland needs to see at the end of the process. We need to retain full access to the single market. If that does not happen, the impact on our economy may be very serious indeed, because Scotland is a trading nation. Our exports support tens of thousands of jobs—not only in Scotland, but elsewhere. They also provide a very tidy income indeed, thank you very much, for Her Majesty’s Treasury. I hope that that will not be forgotten.

We also want to retain free movement of people. The UK Government have decided that free movement of people is fundamentally a bad thing that we should not accept at all, but in order not to have to accept it they are prepared to lose the benefits of membership of the single market. In Scotland, we do not see a conflict, between Scotland’s attitude to the free movement of people and the attitude of some other parts of the UK, and between Scotland’s determination to remain a full part of the single market and the lukewarm reception that the single market gets in other parts of the UK, can be resolved if the Government are prepared to countenance a negotiating position that seeks an agreement to allow immigration rules to apply different criteria in different parts of the United Kingdom, to meet different pressures on services and needs in the employment market. If they are prepared to accept that—it is now quite common practice in a lot of EU countries—the rules on the single market, trade areas, customs union and so on do not have to apply absolutely uniformly across the whole United Kingdom.

It has become increasingly obvious over the past few years that there are very few areas of public policy in which one size can hope to fit all throughout the United Kingdom. I suggest to the Government today that, for some of the major pillars of policy on which we will need to negotiate agreements in the lead-up to Brexit, one size cannot possibly fit both Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

If the Government are not prepared to seek a solution that allows different sizes and different applications of policy in different parts of the United Kingdom, what are they suggesting instead to deliver the stated wish of the sovereigns of Scotland—the 5.5 million people who rightly and inalienably hold the right to determine what the future holds for our nation and which direction it goes in? If they are not prepared to respect that sovereign will, how will they ensure that, when the Brexit process is completed, the people of Scotland believe that they are still valued, equal partners with a mission to lead the Union?

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is great to see the Minister in his customary place; perhaps at the end of the Brexit negotiations his name will be chiselled on to the chair. Does he accept that, as the First Minister said, the United Kingdom that people in Scotland voted to remain part of in 2014 has “fundamentally changed”? That was the expression she used. There has been a fundamental change in circumstances, so we have the right to insist that the mandate in Scotland to remain in the EU is respected in the UK Government’s negotiating position.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) on securing this debate. It is a pleasure to return to Westminster Hall, which the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) suggested should be renamed “Brexit Minister Hall” because of the frequency of my visits. I commend him and his colleagues for their active role in supporting the Department’s debates.

Upon her appointment in July, the Prime Minister committed to full engagement with the devolved Administrations to get the best possible deal for all parts of the United Kingdom as we leave the EU. Following the referendum result, her very first visit was to Edinburgh to meet the First Minister of Scotland, followed quickly by trips to Cardiff and Belfast. Make no mistake: the United Kingdom voted on 23 June to leave the European Union, and we will leave the EU as one United Kingdom. I welcome the acceptance by the hon. Member for Glenrothes that a mandate has been given—at least in some parts of the country—for that process, but I noticed that in his avoidance of the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) he neglected to note that the 2 million people in Scotland who voted to stay in the UK in 2014 outnumber significantly those who voted to remain in the EU.
Mr Walker: I am always pleased to engage with the hon. Gentleman, but it is clear that the referendum was UK-wide. The decision was taken on a UK-wide basis and the negotiations will be conducted on a UK-wide basis. Nevertheless, we do, of course, have to accept the concerns and views of the Scottish people, to which I will come in greater detail.

As we prepare to leave, we stand by our commitment to engagement with the devolved Administrations, including the Scottish Government. The devolved Administrations are having and will have the opportunity to have their say as we form our negotiating strategy. The Prime Minister chaired a plenary meeting of the joint ministerial council in October, at which she discussed the process of preparing to leave the EU with the First Minister of Scotland, the First Minister of Wales, and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland.

We have created a new Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations), which brings together all the constituent parts of the United Kingdom to develop a UK-wide approach to our negotiations. The committee is chaired by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and has agreed to meet monthly as we seek to agree a UK-wide approach to negotiations, share evidence and take forward joint analysis. In our commitment to the JMC(EN) process, we have also agreed to work collaboratively, first, to discuss each Government’s requirements for the future relationship with the EU; secondly, to seek to agree a UK approach to, and objectives for, the article 50 negotiations; and thirdly, to provide oversight of negotiations with the EU, to ensure, as far as possible, that outcomes agreed by all four Governments are secured from the negotiations.

Jim Shannon: I should put on record the fact that although the majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain, in my constituency the majority voted to leave. Nevertheless, throughout Northern Ireland many people who were in the remain camp now accept that the decision has been taken UK-wide, and as such they want to move forward. The issue today is not the decision that was taken on 23 June, but how we move forward for everyone, even those who were in a different camp, most of whom accept that we should move forward.

Mr Walker: I totally accept the hon. Gentleman’s point. Indeed, I was in a different camp during the referendum. I said at the end of last week’s debate that we all must now move forward to ensure that we make the process work not for 48% or 52%, but for 100%. The hon. Gentleman’s point was well made.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the meetings of the committee that has been set up under the Secretary of State’s chairmanship. The Secretary of State agreed last week that a plan would be put to the House before article 50 is triggered—will that group meet before then, during the process, or what?

Mr Walker: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for his intervention. I assure him that the group will meet before that plan comes forward. As I said, monthly meetings of the group are already arranged, and there will be further meetings before the publication of the plan. It is important that the views of the JMC should be taken into account.

Sammy Wilson: Although there is going to be consultation through the JMC, will the Minister make it clear, now, that that does not mean that different regions of the United Kingdom can have a different relationship with the EU, either by volunteering for it or by having it forced on them?

Mr Walker: I absolutely accept the logic of the hon. Gentleman’s point; we need to conduct the negotiation for the whole United Kingdom. Nevertheless, it is important that we demonstrate that our door is open to the Scottish Government and all the other devolved Administrations.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already had a number of discussions with the Scottish Government’s Minister for UK Negotiations on Scotland’s Place in Europe, Mr Russell. Indeed, I welcomed Mr Russell’s comments to the Scottish Affairs Committee on Wednesday 7 December, when he said: “The hotline is working”. I personally attended the recent meeting of the British-Irish Council in Cardiff, with the First Minister of Scotland and Minister Russell, and was pleased to have constructive discussions with that important forum. Such engagement at ministerial level is being complemented by a good deal of engagement at official level. We are holding detailed bilateral meetings with each of the devolved Administrations on key sectors that they identified as priorities, and UK Government Departments are continuing to engage with each of them on their key policy areas.

In preparing for this debate, I decided to revisit the views of the hon. Member for Glenrothes on EU policy. I was pleased to read that last November he said that “...the experts on matters such as fishing and agriculture are very often the people who work in those industries. If we do not listen to them from the very beginning of the process, we will get it wrong.”—[Official Report, 10 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 79WH.] I could not agree more. It is crucial that, as we prepare to leave the EU, we listen to voices from across the UK, and, indeed, from across Scotland. I have detailed some of our engagement with the Scottish Government, but that is only part of the picture.

Peter Grant: The Minister’s exact recollection of my words is better than my own, but I certainly will not disagree that that is what I have said. Given that we agree that the people who understand the fishing industry best are the people who work in the industry, with hindsight does he accept that a previous generation of Ministers treated the fishing industry very badly when they sold it out to Europe in return for benefits elsewhere?

Mr Walker: In this debate, we should focus on the future rather than debate the past, but I think we all accept that we are where we are today because mistakes have been made on Europe in the past.

On our engagement with Scotland and more widely, DExEU Ministers have met more than 130 companies from every sector of the British economy since July. That is one part of a whole of Government effort to speak to every sector and region of the British economy. Behind the scenes, officials across Whitehall are working together to ensure that businesses’ views reach the policymakers who are working to get the right deal for the UK. We have hosted round-tables with universities, energy companies, retailers, professional and business services providers, the financial sector, automotive companies,
construction firms, oil and gas companies, farmers, fishermen, the food industry and businesses in regions throughout the UK. That is just the start of a national conversation that will continue as we leave the European Union.

We will continue to speak to businesses of all sizes and shapes, in every corner of the UK, including Scotland. We want to give small businesses the opportunity to have their say. The Prime Minister has held her first business summit with the Federation of Small Businesses, and we have been visiting chambers of commerce throughout the country and speaking to groups representing family businesses. Our Ministers have visited Wales, Northern Ireland and every region in England, and, of course, the Secretary of State went to Glasgow, where he visited the Tontine business centre and held a stakeholder round-table at the University of Strathclyde.

I was originally planning to visit Scotland this week, but the pressure of parliamentary business means that I now intend to travel to Scotland early next year, as does my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union. Incidentally, on my way here from the voting Lobby, I ran into my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, who assured me that he is very much looking forward to a meeting with the Scotch Whisky Association to discuss some of the opportunities of this process. We will listen to stakeholders, including farmers, the fishing industry, and food and drink manufacturers, as well as the universities—including Scottish universities—representatives of some of which I met earlier today.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes touched on the future trading relationship with the EU. One of our first priorities is to allow UK companies to trade as freely as possible with the single market in goods and services—that is the very point he was making. We will work hard to get the best deal for the whole UK, and we are considering all factors carefully in implementing the referendum decision. We are, though, looking for a unique outcome, not an off-the-shelf solution. We are aiming for the right deal for the United Kingdom. As we conduct our negotiations, it is a priority to secure British companies’ trade with the single market in goods and services.

Indeed, we want the best possible arrangement for trade in goods and services with the EU. We are not seeking to replicate any other model; we want a bespoke approach that works for the whole of the UK, including Scotland. This objective is a priority that I believe businesses across the United Kingdom and across Scotland will share. A single UK position in relation to our future relationship with the EU is vital to protecting the UK’s interests as a whole.

For Scotland, exports to the rest of the UK are worth four times as much as those to the EU. This Government are determined to promote Scotland’s future, including through the extra £800 million of capital funding through Barnett consequentials, as a result of the autumn statement. If that funding is used properly by the Scottish Government, it will make a real difference to productivity, jobs and growth, so that the Scottish economy can perform even more strongly in the future.

I note that the hon. Member for Glenrothes and some of his hon. Friends have touched on a role for the Scottish Government in the negotiations themselves. We have made no decisions yet about the format of the direct negotiations with the European Union. Of course, it will be for the Prime Minister to ensure that we negotiate the best possible future for the United Kingdom, and our Department is there to support her, representing the interests of all the UK’s constituent parts. However, it is very clear that in each of the three devolution settlements, the conduct of international relations is a matter that is expressly reserved. In the Scotland settlement, “international relations...including relations with the European Union” is a reserved matter. That does not diminish our commitment to engaging the Scottish Government. I say again that the JMC(EN) has an important and enduring role in overseeing these negotiations as they take place.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about Scotland’s position on free movement and I know that in the past he has raised the issue of EU citizens living in the UK. Let me repeat what I have said many times on that: I want and the Government want to ensure the rights of EU citizens living in the UK. We need to do that through negotiation and through a reciprocal agreement that also secures the rights of UK citizens, including many Scottish citizens, living in the European Union. It is absolutely vital that we do that at the earliest possible opportunity, and I hope that we will be able to bring news on that front early in the negotiation process after article 50.

Although it is a priority to do that, obviously it must be done through negotiations. Doing otherwise would risk adversely affecting our negotiating position and hence the position of British citizens, including many from Scotland, who have chosen to build a life with their families in other countries.

This is a very important issue and an important debate, and I welcome the discussion that we have had today. The hon. Gentleman is clear that Scotland’s voice will be heard in this process and so am I. We have established good processes for engaging with the Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations through the JMC forums. As we have seen today, Scottish MPs are playing a full and active part in the parliamentary scrutiny that is ongoing in this United Kingdom House of Commons. As the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) pointed out, MPs from across the United Kingdom have that opportunity and are taking it.

We are ensuring that channels exist for official-level discussions on the detail and seeking to build a common evidence base. We stand ready to talk to the Scottish Government at any time. I know that we have heard much talk of plans lately in this House, as per the debate last week, and we will set out more of the detail for the UK plan ahead of the notification of article 50 before the end of March 2017.

We will leave the EU as one United Kingdom, but in doing so it is vital that Scotland’s interests are understood and that the voices of the people, businesses and other groups in Scotland are heard.

Question put and agreed to.
Greater Manchester Spatial Framework

4.43 pm

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the Greater Manchester spatial framework.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth, and it is also a pleasure to be joined by colleagues from both sides of the House for this debate. The cross-party interest in this matter demonstrates the real concerns about the spatial framework that exist among residents right across Greater Manchester. I wish to highlight some of those concerns and draw them to the Minister’s attention today.

The Greater Manchester spatial framework is the product of the Greater Manchester combined authority. It represents the authority’s plans for the management of land for housing, commercial and industrial use for the next 20 years. The framework is currently in draft form and subject to a consultation; I gently remind colleagues and all interested parties that the consultation is open until 23 December.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way so early in his speech. I wonder whether he has had the same concerns expressed to him that I have had to express to me about the fact that the consultation period has been so short and that the consultation has had so little publicity.

William Wragg: I have picked up on that concern and doubtless other right hon. and hon. Members will have heard similar concerns, so I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

I want to make it clear from the outset that I am not against building and development per se, nor am I against the concept of the framework itself; on the contrary.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): The hon. Member is supportive of house-building. How many houses does he think should be built in his constituency?

William Wragg: If the hon. Gentleman waits with bated breath, he will have the answer, later in my speech.

As I say, I am not against development per se and I think that a cross-regional approach for strategic housing allocation across Greater Manchester is to be welcomed. Of course we need to provide new developments to fill the housing shortage, but it must be done in a way that is sensitive to both the local environment and the wishes of local communities. Also, it should be provided only where there is a genuine need and where the infrastructure exists to support such developments.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): A vital part of the infrastructure that must be taken into account is public transport, such as railways. Should not any new housing developments be located on existing public transport routes?

William Wragg: My hon. Friend makes a very sensible point. If he, too, waits until later in my speech, I will refer to what he has just said in detail.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Before he moves on, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

William Wragg: I will happily give way to the hon. Gentleman, my neighbour.

Andrew Gwynne: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but is he concerned, as I am, that there does not appear to be any joined-up thinking between different parts of the combined authority? We are currently in a consultation on the spatial framework, which is identifying whole tracts of land for future development, yet we have just finished a consultation on the Greater Manchester transport strategy 2040, under the guise of Transport for Greater Manchester, which bears no relationship to the spatial framework?

William Wragg: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point about the need for greater “joined-up thinking”, a phrase that is perhaps over-used but rarely put into practice.

It is in this spirit——of building where there is genuine need—that I wish to raise some specific concerns about the methodology behind the framework. The draft framework proposes that 227,200 net additional dwellings will be needed by 2035 to home a projected population increase of almost 300,000 people. It also apportions this house-building target across the 10 Greater Manchester councils, and in the case of Stockport, the allotted target is 19,300 new homes.

I have concerns about how these figures have been arrived at. To estimate the population growth, the spatial framework considered information from the Office for National Statistics, the Department for Communities and Local Government, an economic forecasting model, the Experian credit-referencing agency and independent business consultants. In 2014, the combined authority produced a 165-page document, outlining and consulting on its methodology for calculating future housing needs. Dozens of tables and graphs later, we arrive at the magic prediction of 294,800 extra people by 2035, which translates into that figure of 227,200 new dwellings that I gave before.

Forecasting is a very difficult and complex task, and it is always subject to a degree of uncertainty. However, taking just the most recent three forecasts from the ONS—from 2008, 2010 and 2012—there is a variance of almost 200,000 people between the highest and lowest estimates for the population of Greater Manchester by 2032. This means that the framework’s magic number is two thirds within the margin of error of the three most recent ONS forecasts, and that is without even cross-examining the four other sources.

It is also curious to observe that 10 large housing developers all claimed that the authority’s objectively assessed need figure was too low, whereas the Campaign to Protect Rural England claimed it was “excessively high”. Faced with such wild variance in the estimates of population growth, it is difficult to have faith in the combined authority’s arithmetic. One wonders whether the projected need goes beyond the true need.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. My constituents are also concerned that an absolute number is meaningless if it does not take account of the mix of...
hiring need, which must be matched to the population. They have particularly expressed concern about the need for family homes and affordable homes. Does he agree?

William Wragg: I agree with the hon. Lady, who raises an important point.

My second major area of concern about the draft framework is the proposal to release green-belt land for housing development. It proposes to build on 4,900 hectares of Greater Manchester’s green belt, representing a net loss of just over 8%. Locally, Stockport is set to lose some 9% of its green belt. Some 8,000 homes will be built on green belt in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), whereas in my constituency permission will be given to build a further 4,000 homes on fields around the village of High Lane, essentially doubling the village’s size. Those housing developments have been proposed with little regard for the burden of increased traffic on the road network or the increased pressure on public services, as my hon. Friend for Bolton West (Chris Green) said.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman concerned, as I am—so are my constituents—about the release of green-belt land? We understand from national guidance that green-belt land should be released in only the most exceptional or very special circumstances. In fact, I had a quick look at the planning practice guidance, which says:

“Unmet housing need...is unlikely to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and other harm to constitute the ‘very special circumstances’ justifying...development on...the Green Belt.”

Does he agree?

William Wragg: The hon. Lady’s point is entirely correct. My concern is that the combined authority’s housing target will become an exceptional circumstance, as it appears to think.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

William Wragg: How can I resist?

Graham Stringer: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous. On the allocation of green-belt land for housing, does he agree that the figure is dependent on an assessment of the pipeline of brownfield sites, which has always been underestimated?

William Wragg: The hon. Gentleman is entirely correct. Again, he alludes to something that I will address in my remarks. He is spot on.

If the homes in Stockport are realised, they will account for only two thirds of Stockport’s overall target, so I fear this is likely to be the thin end of the wedge. Last night, my hon. Friends the Members for Cheadle and for Bury North (Mr. Nuttall) presented petitions on behalf of thousands of our constituents who oppose the massive-scale development on the green belt and who want to prioritise building on brownfield land.

The voices not only from my constituency but from neighbouring constituencies, as evidenced by the attendance in Westminster Hall this afternoon, show a clear concern that the green belt should be protected. Green belt is easily the best loved and understood British planning policy, and it is hugely valued. It has been a long-standing commitment of Governments of all colours that redevelopment and reuse of land in urban areas—so-called brownfield sites—should take priority over greenfield sites, and rightly so for a number of reasons. First, it protects the countryside and provides the benefits of green spaces and access to nature and recreation.

On regeneration, we need to get people living in town centres again. Our cities are thriving, but medium and large towns are being neglected. Such depopulation leads to further decline and creates a vicious cycle, as I fear has been witnessed in Stockport. However, Manchester, to its credit, has made great strides. The green belt encourages the regeneration of our towns and the best use of our land.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The green belt also prevents urban sprawl. My constituents in the towns of Heywood and Middleton are extremely concerned about the erosion of the green belt, to the extent that they are worried that, eventually, the two towns will cease to exist, becoming something like Heyton or Midwood.

William Wragg: The hon. Lady possesses great powers of foresight, because my next paragraph is on green belt being a vital barrier to urban sprawl. In the case of Heywood and Middleton, the green belt is an important barrier between the two communities.

As a vital barrier to urban sprawl, the green belt encourages us to build upwards not outwards, to live nearer our places of work and not to commute or congest. Our local roads, infrastructure and transport capacity already struggle with existing demands. The proposals for massive developments in semi-rural areas will only make matters worse.

By contrast, developing vacant brownfield sites that have previously been used for other purposes is a more sensible approach to house building. Such sites are closer to urban centres, retain the countryside, boost regeneration and ease transport pressure yet, before many brownfield sites have been properly utilised, the framework seeks to release green-belt land that, once gone, can never be gotten back. Although building on greenfield sites is sometimes necessary, the release of green-belt land now, and on the scale proposed, is a huge disincentive to the proper use and regeneration of brownfield sites.

Most of our housing is now provided by volume house builders, which are essential to housing provision, but it is worth considering how they operate. Their business model favours large new greenfield developments. If we make sites on green belt available, the volume house builders will develop those sites first and will make the case that sites in our towns are unsuitable or, indeed, unprofitable. Once they have developed on the green-belt releases, they will come back for more before they even look at urban land. Therefore, the opportunity for real regeneration in Stockport and other Greater Manchester towns will be lost for a generation.
Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about the value of the green belt to people living in Stockport and Tameside. He will know that much of our green belt is also recreational space for those two boroughs. Is he concerned, as I am, that some of the sites that have been identified in the spatial framework are within the Tame valley? One site is at Hyde Hall farm in Denton, and there is also a large industrial proposal on the edge of Denton in his constituency. That is wrong, is it not?

William Wragg: It is wrong, and I know the hon. Gentleman had a battle on his hands with the threatened encroachment on Reddish Vale country park.

What will we do to ensure that brownfield developments are prioritised, that our towns are regenerated first and that green-belt land is released only when it is the last option? First, we need an accurate estimate of the amount of urban land available. According to the combined authority’s own figures, Greater Manchester has at least 1,000 hectares of undeveloped brownfield land that has not been earmarked for use. Taken together, the sites have enough space to build at least 55,000 homes—that is a very conservative estimate—which is almost a quarter of the entire Greater Manchester target, as set out in the framework. This is merely a pilot exercise, and I am confident that more sites can be found, as the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) mentioned. However, releasing green-belt land now would totally undermine the incentive for such developments.

Secondly, Greater Manchester combined authority needs to address the familiar issues that prevent development of urban land, such as split ownership, land banking, unrealistic expectations of land value, access, contamination and others.

Thirdly, to make housing in urban areas attractive to new owners and tenants, we need to make town centres places where people want to live, with pleasant, safe surroundings and the right facilities, amenities, public services, schools and healthcare. Those aims could perhaps be achieved by creating a development corporation or similar body with responsibility for regenerating Greater Manchester and with a remit to recycle land and to create fit places to live. That need not cost much, but it would create the proper planning that would stop Greater Manchester sprawling out unsustainably in all directions.

I have three questions for the Minister. Does he agree about the need to protect the green belt and to prioritise the redevelopment of brownfield land as an alternative? Does he agree that green-belt sites should be used only as a very last resort when all brownfield sites have been exhausted? Does he share my ideas for prioritising brownfield development, and what other steps are the Government taking to encourage it? Does he think that Greater Manchester combined authority is justified in its housing target and its desire to release green-belt land in the immediate future?

As I said at the outset, I and the thousands who signed local petitions are not against house building, but we believe in brownfield sites. Sites that have been developed previously should be prioritised for building homes, which not only protects the countryside but focuses development where regeneration is needed and where the necessary infrastructure already exists. The strength of local opinion is clear to see, and it is clear to see in the turnout of colleagues from Greater Manchester in Westminster Hall this afternoon. I thank all those who have supported the campaign.

4.59 pm

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) for securing this important debate. It is right that the Greater Manchester spatial framework be properly scrutinised, as any development will have a lasting effect on our conurbation. Likewise, it is perfectly understandable that many of us have been raising concerns about specific developments and potential developments in our constituencies.

We also have a duty to think about the prosperity of our region and the country as a whole. We need to take into account the views of businesses as well as residents. We need to think about not only those who voted us into office last year, but the young people in our constituencies who, in 10 to 15 years’ time, will be looking for a home in which to live. I therefore want to focus on the bigger picture of what the spatial framework means for the future of Greater Manchester. For me, it is about unleashing opportunities. Our city region is world-renowned for its cultural and sporting dynamism, entrepreneurial spirit and innovation in science and technology. We are a thriving city region, and to sustain that, we need to be able to grow, so that we can attract business, tourists, workers and students, and we need to ensure that Greater Manchester can provide enough homes for future generations to move into and start their own family. The Greater Manchester spatial framework aims to achieve exactly that. It also seeks to address some of the big challenges that this country faces.

We politicians constantly bang on about the housing crisis, and we all agree that to solve that problem, more houses must be built. The spatial framework will help build the houses we desperately need. We also constantly talk about the need to rebalance the economy and address the north-south divide. The spatial framework will go some way to tackling that inequality, so I for one welcome the plan. However, I am not giving it a blank cheque. New homes must be affordable for first-time buyers and people needing to rent at all levels of the market.

Barbara Keeley: I recently had a quick look at the homes that are going up in my constituency on patches of land. The lowest price across the range of new homes was £225,000 in Little Hulton, and the highest was £550,000 in Boothstown. The difficulty is that the homes that go up are aspirational four and five-bedroom homes. They are not affordable.

Simon Danczuk: I appreciate the hon. Lady’s intervention. I completely agree: there needs to be diversity and a mix of accommodation created. The plan has to take that into account, but the plan is designed specifically for new development and is only in draft form. As I pointed out, I do not give the plan a blank cheque; it has to match the needs of every section of our communities.

As the hon. Member for Hazel Grove made clear, infrastructure must be provided with new development. It cannot be an afterthought; that is a particularly important point. I am talking about infrastructure in
the broadest sense of the word—about schools, not just roads. I understand other Members’ concerns about the green belt and the need to prevent urban sprawl. While I do not dispute that access to green open spaces is important to people’s quality of life, surely it is equally, if not more, important to people’s wellbeing to have a roof over their head and a job—things that this plan provides.

Kate Green: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Simon Danczuk: I will just make a little progress.

I am fortunate that Rochdale has many green and open spaces, the vast majority of which will not be affected by the proposals. In fact, the plan promises to create alternative green-belt land in Rochdale, which will go some way to compensating for what is lost. Additionally, many of the development sites in Rochdale will be brownfield sites, using up wasteland and former industrial areas, so it is not as though the proposal has set out to target green-belt land without considering other options first.

Finally, we need to consider the bigger picture. We need to welcome the opportunities provided in the spatial framework—the jobs, the homes and a real plan to tackle national challenges and boost productivity in the north-west. No scheme will be perfect. While we scrutinise and improve the draft proposals, we must also show a degree of pragmatism and, indeed, political leadership.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I should point out, for the avoidance of doubt, that because of the earlier Division, which caused the sitting to be suspended for 15 minutes, we will conclude at 5.45 pm.

5.4 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth, and to see Members from right across Greater Manchester and on the Opposition and Government Benches here to debate this important issue. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) for securing the debate.

I am conscious of time, so I will get straight to what the debate is about. I think we are in agreement that we need a good local plan for the area that provides the housing and infrastructure that we need, but this is not it. The plan lacks vision and has no real foresight or ambition for the future development of Cheadle. While I accept that there is a need for more housing across the country, that should never be achieved through the devastation of the countryside, but place unprecedented pressure on our local infrastructure and undermine our communities.

I am a member of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government. In my constituency, the strength of concern is most evident in the activities of local neighbourhood groups, such as Woodford Neighbourhood Forum, which was set up in October 2013. Since then, members and residents have raised funds and spent thousands of hours working on their local plan. Getting a local plan together is no mean feat. Over the past three years, they have put together more than 340 pages of material, and I am concerned to ensure that their voices are listened to.

There is an urgent need to identify all suitable brownfield sites, including ones in and around Stockport and in urban areas across the Greater Manchester city region, where communities would benefit from the additional investment generated by regeneration projects. The Campaign to Protect Rural England has identified that brownfield sites in the UK have the potential to deliver 1 million houses. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove described, it has been assessed that it is necessary for Stockport to have 19,300 of those houses. It shocks me to say that it is expected, hoped or proposed that more than 8,000 will be built on the green belt in Cheadle. Should the plans go ahead, they will not only devastate the countryside, but place unprecedented pressure on our local infrastructure and undermine our communities.

Andrew Gwynne: Actually, the situation is worse than the hon. Lady describes, because for perfectly good reasons, all 10 local councils want to use the plan as an opportunity to increase their council tax base. Therefore, it will predominantly be executive homes that are developed. Is the real risk not that we end up crashing the housing market in Greater Manchester because we have an over-supply of the wrong kind of homes?

Mary Robinson: I absolutely agree. The hon. Gentleman makes a fundamental point. Indeed, it is expressly in the plan that the area around Cheadle—particularly Woodford—will be allocated for high-end, low-volume housing, and the expectation is that funds will come to Stockport Council. That is exactly it. Of course, the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) will not necessarily get the housing that he needs there if developers choose to build on our green belt.

Simon Danczuk: The truth is that if we do not have a plan, we will get the housing that the developers choose to give us.

Mary Robinson: Absolutely. I started my speech by saying that we must have a plan—we all acknowledge that—and that it has to be the right plan for our areas and for Greater Manchester. It is great that we all have that common theme in mind.

The Campaign for Better Transport has spoken about the necessity of commuter hubs and the challenges for housing allocations that are more than a 15-minute walk from rail and tram stations, yet the draft plan mentions no provision for new railway stations or transport infrastructure.
Chris Green: Do my hon. Friend’s constituents have the same fears as mine, who think that we will definitely get the houses in the housing proposals, but are less certain about getting the other infrastructure developments? Will we get health, school and transport infrastructure to go along with the houses? We will get the houses first, but the other things may or may not follow.

Mary Robinson: Absolutely. That uncertainty adds to our feeling about the plan. The framework notes that significantly improved public transport is a prerequisite for the site off the A34. However, the walking distance between Woodford and Bramhall and Poynton railway stations is certainly a lot more than 15 minutes, even for the most ardent trekker.

Kate Green: The hon. Lady makes an important point about transport links. Does she share my surprise that transport operators—both bus and train operators—told me that they have no knowledge of the details of the proposed spatial strategy and that they have no plans to adapt their forward planning to take account of what might be in the strategy?

Mary Robinson: That is an excellent point well made. That is lacking in the plan. When it comes to the northern powerhouse and what we want to do in Greater Manchester, it is essential that we get those transport links right. That needs to be considered.

Finally, I make a plea to the Minister to listen to local voices. It is important that people’s voices are heard in this consultation and through the other representations that they make. Local people have already formed themselves into groups, such as the Woodford Neighbourhood Forum, to plan and shape their neighbourhoods.

5.12 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) on securing this debate on a subject that will affect all our constituents in Greater Manchester. I am sure that we all subscribe to the aspirations set out in the draft framework to enhance economic performance, improve the environment and provide additional homes and jobs for the future. However, linking the green-belt review to the plan has not facilitated plan development; it has simply led to a feeding frenzy among developers, which is in a different borough—and cause complete gridlock on our roads? The recently completed north-west quadrant study, which the Minister can perhaps study, shows that the motorway and road network near my constituency has 15 of the 100 worst-performing motorway sections in the country for journeys completed on time. Our journey times are four and a half times longer than the mile a minute they are supposed to be, we have one of the poorest safety records in the country on our local roads and motorways, and almost all the motorways near my constituency are in the top 20% worst performing, in terms of casualties. The real killer, if I can put it that way, is air pollution and air quality problems, which are dreadful in Salford—much worse than the national average.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) continues, I have been very tolerant of lengthy interventions. Some Members have had the equivalent of a speech in interventions during this debate. Interventions need to be a bit more focused.

Yvonne Fovargue: I accept that. We need to look not just within but outside Greater Manchester. Many hon. Members have mentioned the removal of the green belt. In my constituency, green belt status has been removed around junctions 25 and 26 of the M6. As we have heard, removing green belt status requires exceptional circumstances. In 2013, the independent inspector deemed that the local authority’s request to remove half the area it is now proposing to remove around junction 25 was not exceptional, so it was refused, yet a mere three years later, the M6 South of Wigan Action Group, which did sterling work with me in opposing the plan, is in exactly the same position as it was. We are again opposing the plan together.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): A week ago, my hon. Friend and I held a meeting in Kitt Green in my constituency, which borders hers. The sight of hundreds of people queuing on a dark, cold night to get into a church hall to make their views heard was deeply moving. Does my hon. Friend agree that the strength of feeling expressed in that hall simply cannot be ignored by local authorities and the Minister?

Yvonne Fovargue: I agree. I am moving quickly on to junction 26. I ask the Minister: how can we be in the same position three years on? What weight will be given to the inspector’s decisions throughout this process?
Let me move on to the infrastructure. Junction 25 is a one-way junction. In the plan for transport, there is an aspiration to have a two-way junction, but it is said that it could take 40 years. Until then, there will be thousands more HGV movements on already gridlocked roads in an area that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) said, already fails air quality standards. That does not appear to meet any definition of sustainable development. It does not increase the attractiveness of the area, and it certainly does not improve the air quality. Equally, as my hon. Friend mentioned, the land at junction 26—the Bell—has infrastructure issues. It is accepted that development will be difficult unless there are major upgrades to the road system, including a new slip road. I think the phrase “cart before the horse” was used at the public meeting that we called, which attracted nearly 200 residents.

Let me move on to how those residents can make their voices heard by the leaders of their local authorities. Usually, it is via their councillors and in discussion at council meetings. However, there is some doubt about whether these plans need to be approved by local councils, whether they should be taken at cabinet level at each local authority, or whether it is solely the prerogative of the leader of each local authority to approve the plans at a meeting of the combined authorities. Can the Minister clarify that? How does a local councillor, elected by their constituents, stand up and represent their views if they are denied a forum in which to speak? Is there not a democratic deficit in that?

No one is against jobs and growth, but the plans have to demonstrate that the growth is sustainable. As for the warehousing development in my area, this is an area with a net loss of graduates and people who need high-quality jobs. We need the right jobs in the right place. We have to balance quality of life and the attractiveness of the environment.

I will bowdlerise an Ogden Nash poem—I am going back to my youth—to express what I feel about this: I think that I will never see a warehouse attractive as a tree. The green belt gives us green fields, trees, relief from urban sprawl and better air quality. It is the green lung of our urban areas. It increases the attractiveness of an area, which encourages people to come to it. An ambitious plan for Greater Manchester, which will be seen as a trailblazer on this issue, should not take the easy option and reduce green-belt land. It should look for innovative and exciting ways of promoting the use of brownfield sites to improve the environment for those coming into the borough and for those who already live there.

5.20 pm

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): It is a pleasure to have you taking charge of this debate, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) on securing the debate and for the very sensible and valid points he made in his opening speech. There can be no doubt that the spatial framework produced by the Greater Manchester combined authority has caused enormous consternation across my Bury North constituency. It is probably one of the biggest issues that I have come across in the last 10 or 12 years. It clearly makes sense for any local authority or group of local authorities to have a plan, to review that plan and to determine how many houses might be needed for the next few years. I think we could all agree on that. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove, I have my doubts about how robust the figures used in the framework are, with immigration over the past few years—I am not making a political point; this is just a fact—running at more than 300,000 a year, which even the latest figures show.

Simon Danczuk: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that he belongs to a party that has been in government for a considerable time and that said it would dramatically reduce the number of immigrants coming into the country. There has been a complete failure by his Government to do that.

Mr Nuttall: I do not want to be diverted on to a debate about immigration when we are discussing housing. But the two things are connected. More can be done and I have argued that point many times in the Chamber. One thing has fundamentally changed since those figures were drawn up and that is the referendum we had in June. That will enable this country to have more control over its borders as far as immigration from the European Union is concerned. That is a fact. We can debate lots of other things, but that will happen, and I wonder to what extent that has been reflected in the numbers.

The biggest concern of most of the hundreds, if not thousands, of people who have contacted me about the plans is the erosion of the green belt. My view is that the green belt is there for a purpose. It was put there to protect the land from development.

Before I came to this place, I was involved in the legal profession. We acted for one or two house builders, so I know how they operate. I can tell the House this: given the choice between developing a nice, flat, green field and having to sort out a brownfield site, they are going to choose the greenfield site every single time. The plan is like manna from heaven for developers. They were asked to put in bids and to give expressions of interest. Obviously, they came round Greater Manchester and thought, “This is fantastic! We’ll have that site, we’ll have that one, we’ll have that one and I wouldn’t mind building a few houses there!” In my own patch, for example, Bury’s green belt is threatened around Elton reservoir, with nearly 3,500 new homes planned, and between Walshaw and Tottington, where another 1,250 homes are planned. Some 100 homes are planned in Holcombe Brook and they are nibbling at the green belt around Gin Hall for an industrial estate.

I appreciate that I do not have time to go into detail about all those sites, but I want to place on record a point about infrastructure, which has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members today. We do not have to speculate on what will happen; we just need to look at the history. My constituency has had house building galore over the past few years. We can see what happens. House building goes ahead without any of the necessary infrastructure in place, without the necessary road improvements and without schools. One site at Walshaw, the spatial framework says:

“Elton High School is within easy reach of the site. The school is currently subject to a Government-funded rebuilding programme that will provide good quality opportunities for secondary education in the vicinity of the site.”
It is not “will”—it has already happened. It is open and the school is there. The point is that the school is full. There is no point saying that it is going to provide extra places for all the thousands of new homes that are going to be built. That is just one example of how the spatial framework does not take account of reality.

I agree that brownfield sites should be developed before greenfield sites, but I can be as sure as anything that if this plan sees the light of day, the developers will all want to put pressure straightaway on building on the greenfield sites and the brownfield sites will still be brownfield sites in 20 years’ time. They still will not have been developed.

Finally, perhaps—I do not know what time you want to start the wind-ups, Mr Howarth?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): At 5.30 pm, but the hon. Gentleman should not feel that he is required to take up all the intervening time.

Mr Nuttall: I am conscious of that. In my constituency, which has been very badly affected by flooding, the drainage and sewers are of significant importance and that may be the case in other constituencies as well. Everyone can agree that some of that is directly related to the house building that has gone on. I have spoken to representatives from United Utilities, who have said, “Look, all these houses were built here and we are just suddenly expected to have to try and provide extra drainage for them.” We know from history—we do not have to speculate—what will go on.

Wildlife habitats will be lost and I have had a lot of representations about that. The point about air quality was mentioned by the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) as well as by other hon. Members. We already have gridlock virtually every night in Bury town centre. If there are thousands more cars on the streets arising from these housing developments, the air quality will only deteriorate further.

I hope that the brief discussion we have had here this afternoon will give pause for reflection. We accept that there has got to be new housing, but the powers that be—

William Wragg: For the record, may I point out that there is an excellent Conservative candidate for the mayoral election next year, Sean Anstee?

Dr Blackman-Woods: Will the Conservative candidate have good ideas about planning? That remains to be seen.

I suggest to the Minister—

Simon Danczuk: Will the hon. Lady give way?
Dr Blackman-Woods: I am afraid I cannot give way, because I am in my last minute. I am terribly sorry.

It is important for the Minister to talk to the combined authority about how it can put together a spatial framework that better reflects what local people want and so that a system is in place to enable all aspects of the planning system to connect. We can then get the homes, jobs and infrastructure that we need, so that the area can develop.

5.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): I begin with an apology. This is my second appearance in Westminster Hall this week, and on neither occasion have I come to respond on my own area of policy. I can only assume that that is because I am doing such a good job that no one has felt the need to hold me accountable for it yet. However, I apologise today on behalf of the Minister for Housing and Planning, who is in the main Chamber for the important debate on homelessness.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. The Minister should be aware that lack of knowledge never seems to impede anyone in this House.

Andrew Percy: As we are about to prove, Mr Howarth.

I was also tempted simply to hand the debate over to the various candidates standing for the mayoralty, so that they could offer up their vision of the plan. Shortly, thanks to the devolution deal negotiated with the Manchester authorities, the spatial framework will land on the combined authority and the new Mayor’s desk, whoever he or she is.

Mr Graham Brady: I will not press the Minister too much on detail, but will he be clear that the Greater Manchester spatial framework is a matter for local determination and that the Government in no way seek to force on Greater Manchester certain figures for housing development or the removal of green belt?

Andrew Percy: Absolutely. The housing figures are generated by the local authorities. I cannot comment on their validity or the merits of the Greater Manchester numbers because of the obvious proprietary reasons, which I will say more about in a moment. The figures are locally determined and are not provided by central Government.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) on securing the debate and on representing his constituents today with skill and passion. That has to be balanced, of course, with the views of residents, who, as many hon. Members rightly said, Members rightly said, should be at the centre of the planning system, and with Government policy, MPs’ views, environmental constraints and external pressures from developers.

The plan then has to identify objectively what development is needed for employment, economic growth, housing and infrastructure, to come up with strategic options and, of course, to engage local people again in deciding where that development should go. I reiterate that this is a very democratic process, and rightly so. Local people need to be at the heart of it.

The dates for the current consultation have already been referred to, but there has been a series of public consultations on the spatial framework draft plan. The consultation document was published on 31 October, and the consultation will end on 23 December. A final draft of the plan is expected in 2017.

Lisa Nandy: The picture that the Minister paints is very different from my experience and that of many of my colleagues and my constituents. Most of my constituents had never heard anything about the plan before I wrote to tell them about it. Even the name—Greater Manchester spatial framework—is deliberately off-putting to people. It is incredibly difficult for the public to get into these documents, understand what is proposed and make their voices heard. It would be very welcome if the Minister acknowledged those difficulties and put his support behind the public having a real say in the matter.

Andrew Percy: I served for 10 years as a local councillor, and I cannot pretend that agreeing our joint local plans or strategic planning policies necessarily excited the electorate or was the talk of the Dog and Duck on a weekend, but the public are certainly interested in the delivery of more homes, industrial development and all the rest of it. This process is managed locally, not by central Government, so the hon. Lady will need to speak to her local authorities about how they have advertised and consulted the public; it is not a matter for me to determine.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Percy: I have literally five minutes, but I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman as long as he is very quick.

Andy Burnham: One of the problems that our constituents will have with this plan is about how the road network will cope, because it feels like it is already at saturation point. The north-west of England desperately needs significant investment in rail infrastructure. Does the
Minister for the northern powerhouse agree that high-quality west-east rail across the north of England is a higher investment priority than Crossrail 2 in London?

Andrew Percy: I am not going to get into the divisive argument about whether what happens in London should happen elsewhere. This country should be capable of delivering proper rail networks for both London and the north of England.

All parties have a responsibility for the decades of under-investment in the north of England, particularly in east-west connectivity. We are putting £2.8 billion into the current franchises for improvements and £13 billion into transport improvements across the north over this Parliament. We have, of course, created Transport for the North, which will come forward next year with strategic rail investment proposals for the entire north. That is something we have never seen before, and it will have the basis and nature of what happens in London with Transport for London. The northern powerhouse rail and High Speed 3 proposals, which are being developed at the moment, are of course part of that. That work will be completed next year, and I hope that Transport for the North will come forward with strong proposals for rail investment, because infrastructure is really important.

I have only three or four minutes left, and I want to respond clearly to a couple of points that my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove made about brownfield sites. We have been clear that we are seeking to prioritise brownfield sites for development. We have reaffirmed our commitment to 90% of suitable brownfield sites having planning permission for new homes by 2020. We have taken action such as widening permitted development rights to help give new life to thousands of under-used buildings. We are ensuring that the new homes bonus continues to reward councils when long-empty homes are brought back into use. We are accelerating the disposal of surplus public sector brownfield land for development, and we have put an additional £1.2 billion into enabling starter homes to be created on brownfield sites.

Importantly, we will create a brownfield register, which will provide up-to-date, publicly available information about brownfield land that is suitable for development, so the public will be able to see what land is designated as brownfield in an area and whether it has been developed. We have also introduced permission in principle, a new route to planning permission that will give up-front certainty that the fundamental principles are acceptable before developers need to get into costly technical matters.

My hon. Friend asked whether we should have a more rigid brownfield-first policy. We must be careful, because not all brownfield sites can be developed, due to environmental and pollution concerns and all the rest of it, but we are clear that brownfield sites should be prioritised. That is why the percentage of new residential addresses—that includes conversions, some of them under the rules changes I mentioned before—created on brownfield sites was 61% last year, up from 58% in 2014-15. We are quite rightly trying to prioritise brownfield sites.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) and the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) raised infrastructure, and the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) mentioned road safety. Yesterday, we devolved some functions to Greater Manchester through statutory instrument, and one of those was road safety promotion. The combined authority and the Mayor will be able to exercise that new power.

We must match infrastructure to development—there is no doubt about that. That is why we announced in the autumn statement a £2.3 billion housing and infrastructure fund to do that. Over the last decade or so, we have all been victims of developments in our local areas that have not necessarily come with the most appropriate infrastructure, so we are absolutely clear about the issue.

In my final five or 10 seconds, I reiterate that the plan can go ahead only if it enjoys the unanimous support of every council that sits on the combined authority. It really is in the hands of local people.

5.45 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Thursday 15 December 2016

[Mr Clive Betts in the Chair]

Air Quality

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 13 December 2016 on Air Quality.]

1.30 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on Session 2015-16, Air Quality, HC 479, and the Government response, HC 665.

Thank you for chairing this sitting, Mr Betts. It is lovely to see so many members of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee here today to support our work on tackling air quality and our recent report. We took evidence again two days ago on air quality, so this debate is timely. It is good to see the Under-Secretary of State for Transport in her place.

Tackling Britain’s air quality problem must be at the top of the Government’s agenda. Poor air quality contributes to around 40,000 to 50,000 early deaths every year in the UK. This is 20 to 30 times the number of people who die on our roads in traffic accidents every year. Poor air quality is a silent killer. In any other area of policy, the Government would be moving heaven and earth to get it sorted out as quickly as possible, and that is what we now need to do. The Government have been in court twice, and twice they have lost their case. This is a matter of urgency for the quality of life of all people in this country, but especially for those who live in our inner cities in hotspots of air pollution.

The Committee's report in April 2016 said that poor air quality is a public health emergency and called for strong measures to tackle the problem, including an overarching Government strategy to tackle it in all sectors, with flexibility for councils to implement their own clean air zones with higher charges for the most polluting vehicles in those areas, a scrappage scheme for the oldest and most polluting vehicles and proper incentives in the low-emission vehicle market. We have an able Minister here today from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but she is not answerable directly to the Department for Transport or the Department for Communities and Local Government. Everybody—the whole Government, including the Treasury, which deals with vehicle taxation, and others—must work together to deliver a good and urgent response. We want action, not just words.

The Government are in the dock. Having lost their case in the Supreme Court in April 2015 for failing to meet the legal air quality limit, they then lost again on 2 November 2016. The High Court case was brought by ClientEarth. The judgment was that the Government had not fully complied with the Supreme Court's earlier ruling and that their old air quality plan was not up to scratch. DEFRA must now release a new draft plan for air quality by 24 April 2017 and a final report on 31 July 2017—four months away and seven months away.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the Government have twice been pulled kicking and screaming into court to lose cases for breaching EU air quality limits, does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that post-Brexit we will not have that regime to ensure mandatory, legally enforceable air quality limits?

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. Provided the Government do not tamper with the great repeal Act and that EU legislation automatically becomes UK legislation, there should not be a problem. I do not think the Government would do that for the simple reason that not only would it be wrong, but people in this country expect decent air quality. I think it will rise up the political agenda more and more, and I suspect that trying to water down environmental control on air quality would not be popular with anyone.

Geraint Davies: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that 40,000 people are already dying prematurely, so there is no reason to think the Government are treating the matter seriously or that post-Brexit they will fulfil the legal obligations they are being dragged into court to fulfil?

Neil Parish: We have two years at the very least before we leave the European Union. The case is being made that the Government must be answerable with a proper plan by July 2017, so I think much of this will be driven before we leave the EU. I still believe that it would be very unwise and careless to try to water down legislation on air quality when people are becoming much more aware of the situation. It is reducing life expectancy and all Governments of whatever colour will be asked to commit to policies to improve air quality dramatically.

The High Court case was brought by ClientEarth. To lose once in the Court could be seen as careless; to lose twice is negligent. The Under-Secretary told the EFRA Committee that the High Court case was a wake-up call. How many more wake-up calls do the Government need? Urgent action is needed now to address the problem once and for all.

On Tuesday, the EFRA Committee held a fresh evidence session on air quality with the Under-Secretary who is here today and the Minister of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes). The Under-Secretary said that air quality is a top priority for her and the Transport Minister. We need evidence, but in this case I am afraid the Committee was unconvinced by the evidence we heard on Tuesday that there is enough urgency in the Government’s policy. The Minister repeatedly emphasised the role of local government in tackling air pollution and that is absolutely correct, but we must make sure the Government give the necessary powers and in some cases the necessary resources for that to happen. The Committee fears that, as happens under all Governments of all persuasions, it is easy to say, “It’s all in the hands of local government; it’s not in our hands.” Then local government turns round to central Government and says, “The Government haven’t done enough. We don’t have enough resource or the necessary legislation.”
We cannot keep arguing about whose problem it is, because it is the Government—it is DEFRA—that is in the dock, and in the end we have to answer for it. I do sympathise with this Minister, because she has to, and I am sure will, work with all other Departments, but getting all Departments to work together is a challenge in itself. However, we must do that, because in the end people will die prematurely if we do not sort it.

We talk in the recommendations about a diesel scrappage scheme. That is for older diesel cars in particular. The Government should consider a scrappage scheme. We had evidence on Tuesday from witnesses who talked about that. I do not want to make it too complicated, but perhaps it could be targeted slightly at income as well, because what often happens with a scrappage scheme if we are not careful is this. The professional middle-class people think, “Well, this is a very good time to change our car. We have a car or two that are older and we can have a new car.” The problem is that many people in our inner cities who are driving older cars may not necessarily have the income, even with a scrappage scheme, to go out and buy a new car. Perhaps if we could target a scrappage scheme not only at diesel cars but at those who can least afford a new car, we could do something about the problem.

In addition, it is now possible to convert many diesel cars to liquid petroleum gas. That cuts their emissions by about 70%, but again, is it really wise to spend a lot of money on an older diesel car?

The current—illegal—Government plan provides for only five compulsory clean air zones, but we know that pollution in dozens of areas elsewhere in England exceeds EU limits. That is why the Government must look at the whole country when considering hotspots, which is where the high levels of pollution are. The answer to a written question that I tabled to DEFRA is that a full 40% of councils in the UK breached nitrogen dioxide limits in the last year. The problem is widespread in our country; it is not just in our biggest towns. All local authorities should have the power, and the funding, to implement clean air zones if they wish to. In October, the Government provided a £3 million fund for local authorities to bid from to improve air quality. That is a start, but it is a very small amount of money, considering the number of areas that will need clean air zones.

As I said, we had the Transport Minister before us on Tuesday. The interesting thing that the Government have not yet accepted totally is that, not quite for a generation but probably for 15 years or more, there has been a push towards diesel cars. It has been advantageous but perhaps it could be targeted slightly at income as well, because what often happens with a scrappage scheme if we are not careful is this. The professional middle-class people think, “Well, this is a very good time to change our car. We have a car or two that are older and we can have a new car.” The problem is that many people in our inner cities who are driving older cars may not necessarily have the income, even with a scrappage scheme, to go out and buy a new car. Perhaps if we could target a scrappage scheme not only at diesel cars but at those who can least afford a new car, we could do something about the problem.

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As I said, we had the Transport Minister before us on Tuesday. The interesting thing that the Government have not yet accepted totally is that, not quite for a generation but probably for 15 years or more, there has been a push towards diesel cars. It has been advantageous to have “cleaner” diesel: people pay less road tax, and diesel cars emit less carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide and are much more fuel-efficient than many petrol cars. Previously, the issue was carbon dioxide; now, it is very much nitric dioxide, so we have to start moving the taxation system away from supporting the diesel engine and towards hybrids, clean petrols and electric cars. A grant system is in place—I will talk about that in a minute—but we also need to use a bit of a stick in order to move people away from diesel cars. I understand the position because I have diesel cars; indeed, many of us in this Chamber will have. It is a fairly clean diesel, but we have to start to say to people, “You have to try to change your philosophy from diesel to petrol to hybrid to electric.”

Since the Volkswagen scandal, we know that many emission figures were completely fictional. We have only to pick up a new car magazine. There are various ones out there, and they will give us a list of the manufacturer’s claims. They will say, “This car will do 68 miles to the gallon,” and then they will say, “True figure: 45—Government figure.”

There is no doubt that we have to get away from that. It is not just Volkswagen making such claims; all sorts of people are making the claims. It is just that Volkswagen is the one that got caught. In the end, we have to have a true figure, so that when people go to buy a car, they know what the pollution levels are and how many miles to the gallon it will do. This applies to anything else that is bought and sold in life. Surely it is against the Trade Descriptions Act that we are buying something when the claim about it is not actually true. We need to do much more on that. The Government must ensure that vehicle companies’ marketing claims are fully accurate and reflect real-world conditions. When devising the new plan, the Government must take into account the most accurate figures on vehicle emissions. If the new figures show an even greater need for additional clean air zones, the Government must act accordingly.

Geraint Davies: On the VW scandal, the hon. Gentleman will know that the Department of Justice in the US took VW to court on behalf of the Environmental Protection Agency and is suing it for $12 billion, but I think that in Britain the figure is £1.1 million. Does he not think that through the British Government and, indeed, across Europe we should be taking firmer action against VW, given that we know the emissions are 40 times the EU limits because of the removal of the defeat devices, and that is literally killing thousands and thousands of people across Britain and Europe?

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. I suspect that the Americans took the case for various reasons—not just because of the pollution from the vehicles, but because they wanted to ensure that European vehicles did not get so much into the American market. However, we have missed an opportunity to drill down on Volkswagen. As I said, on Tuesday we had the Transport Minister before us, who said that the Government are now looking to sue Volkswagen. It is not good if they are, but we should have got on to that more quickly. Look at the congestion charges that people have paid. If their vehicle was more polluting than was suggested by the band that the vehicle was in, surely Transport for London has missed out on extra charges that should have been paid.

To go back to my previous point, I believe that if an individual has been sold a car that has not met the standards, they should be compensated also. This is not just about the Government; there is a case for the individual, too. I have some sympathy for Volkswagen because it is the one having to face the music, but if we take action against Volkswagen, that will perhaps ensure that the other manufacturers also perform better and do not go down the route of misleading people and
understand this—is that if ammonium fertiliser is applied evaporate into the atmosphere. fertilisers, that those are put on so that they do not spread at the right time and, if someone uses artificial through improved feeding for livestock. This is not just and nutrient management and cut methane emissions farmers adopt practices that cut emissions of greenhouse farm and here in London.

they do not need to have their engines running while in need for electric to be attached to these ships so that (Jim Fitzpatrick) will talk about cruise ships and the I am sure that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse are all diesel; some are gas-converted, but many are not. sites where we have generators and many of the dumper ha ve to be able to charge those cars quickly . get people to use electric cars over a bigger area, they sure that people can charge quickly . If we are going to about having electric charging points; it is about making tackle air pollution and air quality . This is not only about ultra-low emission vehicles the priority they deserve, to with her counterparts in joint ministerial groups to give charging points . This issue is cross-Departmental. I assure Members that the EFRA Committee will continue to scrutinise the plans that are published by the Government next year. We intend, only metaphorically, to hold the Minister's feet to the fire and to ensure that we make good very good progress in the future.

I will move on to agriculture emissions—of course, transport emissions dominate press coverage, but other sectors also cause air pollution, including agriculture. Before I do, I must mention that there are also building sites where we have generators and many of the dumper trucks—all those things people use on a building site—that are all diesel; some are gas-converted, but many are not. I am sure that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) will talk about cruise ships and the need for electric to be attached to these ships so that they do not need to have their engines running while in port and here in London.

Turning to agriculture, the report recommended that farmers adopt practices that cut emissions of greenhouse gases and local air pollutants including ammonia. DEFRA needs to target support for farmers to improve manure and nutrient management and cut methane emissions through improved feeding for livestock. This is not just about the storage of manures; it is also about the spreading of them. It is about making sure that they are spread at the right time and, if someone uses artificial fertilisers, that those are put on so that they do not evaporate into the atmosphere.

One of the problems—being a practical farmer, I understand this—is that if ammonium fertiliser is applied and it does not rain, quite a lot of that fertiliser is released into the atmosphere. It is about trying to make sure that fertiliser is applied when it does actually rain. Believe it or not, even now, although the weather forecast is nearly perfect, it is not always 100% perfect—it does not always rain. Sometimes we can make sure that the fertiliser is injected into the crop. If we can get this right, not only would having less ammonia going up into the atmosphere be an advantage to the environment, but it would be a huge advantage to the farmer because he would be applying less nitrogen and making better use of it. It is the same with our fertilisers.

The New Zealanders have done quite a lot of work on making sure that grasses grown are more digestible. Believe it or not, that reduces the amount of methane gas that comes from the livestock sector. I declare an interest as a farmer—I do not want to see the end of the livestock sector in order to see less methane gas. We have to work out a smart way of using that ruminant—a wonderful animal that digests lower-grade proteins and produces a high-grade protein—to make it emit less methane gas. It is not just nitrogen dioxide, but gases such as methane and ammonia, that contribute to these air quality problems.

In conclusion, clean air should be a right, not a privilege. This matter is not going to go away and it is inconceivable, in my view and that of the Committee, that the Government should lose in the courts on this issue for a third time. The first air quality plan was illegally poor. The Government cannot make that mistake again. It is time for a comprehensive strategy to tackle this problem once and for all. We need to have some real practical measures out there that reduce the amount of nitric oxide, in particular, that is in our inner cities. I can assure Members that the EFRA Committee will continue to scrutinise the plans that are published by the Government next year. We intend, only metaphorically, to hold the Minister's feet to the fire and to ensure that we make good very good progress in the future.

1.56 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Betts. I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Tiverton (Neil Parish), who chairs the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee so well and with such authority. As he said, there is a degree of curiosity about the fact that we are speaking to the Minister today, having had some robust exchanges with her only two days ago in the Committee. I am sure that we will come back to that.

I will be brief because in his opening comments the Select Committee Chairman effectively detailed the Committee’s main recommendations, and I am sure that the Minister will focus on the responses, so I do not see any need to repeat what the hon. Gentleman said. The one comment I will make before focusing on ship emissions on the Thames, is that were 150 people dying prematurely from any other cause in Britain, there would be a massive public outcry and a demand for immediate action from the public and the media. However, this silent killer escapes the scrutiny that it warrants except, occasionally, from the media and the Evening Standard in particular. That is clearly an exception because of the impact on London; it carried the report in its columns yesterday, and the issue even made it into its editorial column because the issue is so important in London.
I want to focus briefly on shipping emissions from the Thames. To put this in perspective, on Tuesday, in response to questions during a discussion on the European directive on air quality, the Minister correctly said that poor air recognises no national boundaries. Obviously she is absolutely right, but neither does it recognise city boundaries or borough boundaries. On Tuesday, the Minister’s response to our exchange on the prospective emissions from the proposed cruise terminal at Enderby Wharf on the Thames was that, on the question of ship to shore power, the Royal Borough of Greenwich had carried out an impact assessment in its planning committee so it was job done. I am sorry to say that for many of us that was just not adequate. It is not adequate not only for residents in east London, such as Ralph Hardwick from my side of the river, who has been campaigning vigorously on this issue, but for residents on both sides of the river and in many parts of London.

It is not just residents, constituents, the Chair of the Select Committee and myself who are unhappy; the EFRA Committee collectively articulated unhappiness about this, as have the Mayor of London, the European Commission and the UK courts on two occasions, as the Select Committee Chair outlined. In his letter to the Minister on 14 December, he said:

“The Committee was disappointed with the information Ministers provided. We are extremely concerned that, despite the courts twice rejecting its plans, the Government has failed to grasp the serious impacts of poor air quality on British people.”

However, in the Minister’s defence, her position was qualified in two elements of the Government response to the Committee’s report. On page seven, in response to recommendation 8, the Government said:

“There will be no ‘one size fits all’ approach...However, it is important Clean Air Zones are co-ordinated from a national perspective”, recognising that this is not a local borough issue or even a city issue. On page 15, in response to recommendation 22, the Government said that they “recognise through the National Policy Statement (NPS) for Ports, that local air pollution may be abated through the provision of shore-side fixed electrical power to replace ships’ generators while in port. The NPS encourages developers including ports and shipping companies to examine the opportunities available for shore-side electricity connection, particularly in areas identified as having poor air quality. All proposals should either include reasonable advance provisions to allow the possibility of future provision of appropriate infrastructure, or give reasons as to why it would not be economically and environmentally worthwhile to make such provision.”

I am not sure that the Royal Borough of Greenwich council’s decision addressed either of those issues. The discussion we had in Committee on Tuesday—and have had for some months now—was that it was not done to the Royal Borough of Greenwich’s planning committee to decide on the matter, because it is a pan-London matter. In fact, it goes even wider than that. The Mayor of London has no locus and could not call in the planning decision. The Department for Transport has no locus either, and nor does the Port of London Authority. The Minister, who has responsibility for air quality, to whom we look to be our champion in Government, also does not have the power. Therefore, the Royal Borough of Greenwich’s decision is heavily undermined, and fatally flawed and compromised.

As I said, the Minister’s position was qualified by the two responses from the Government to the recommendations that I mentioned. Further, in response to question 93 in the oral evidence session, her senior colleague, the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), said:

“We have both said publicly that we are going to bring a further report, because we have to, given the decision of the court that the Chairman mentioned at the outset, and I would be surprised if there was not an expectation that we addressed this issue. It would be very odd if we left this issue out. I will certainly take away what you have said and we will discuss it in the inter-ministerial group. I would certainly want to address this before the date you suggest.”

In conclusion, I hope that the Minister can confirm that her joint ministerial committee will address the issue of emissions from the Thames. It would be really helpful if she set out in her winding-up speech the frequency of the joint ministerial meetings and the timetable for its final report. This is a very important issue, particularly for London but to the whole country as well, and I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

2.3 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am probably something of an interloper today, given that I am not a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. However, I am a member of the Select Committee on Health, and this issue is equally important to members of that Committee. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), the Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, said, this is an urgent and important issue. The fact that there are 40,000 to 50,000 additional deaths in the UK each year shows how significant it is, and we are right to pay real attention to it. However, we need to realise that this is also a global issue. The American Association for the Advancement of Science calculated that in 2013 there were 3.5 million deaths as a result of air pollution worldwide; 1.6 million were in China and 1.4 million were in India. That does not make the issue in our country any less urgent, but it is important to put the debate in a global context.

Geraint Davies: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that 10% of deaths in the UK are linked to air pollution compared with 17% in China? Let us not pretend that we are not appalling and that they are worse.

Andrew Selous: I would not be speaking in this debate if I did not think this was an important issue. We all have a shared purpose, wherever we sit in the House, in wanting to take serious action on this issue.

Going from the global level to a local one, the constituency I represent has three market towns. One of them, Dunstable, has an air-quality management area in the town centre and in the Luton Road area. There are 37 different monitoring points for air quality in that area. I remember many years ago, not long after I was first elected, my excellent GP in the centre of Dunstable telling me that many more children who live in central Dunstable—close to the A5 trunk road, which goes through the middle of the town—suffered from asthma than the children who lived in Dunstable’s suburbs or...
the villages around the town. That is replicated up and down our country, not just in town centres. People who live next to busy roads are affected, which is something that we also need to bear in mind in future planning decisions.

I completely agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton said about making sure that we transition from dirty energy in road transport to cleaner energy in an affordable way for our constituents. We all want clean air, but people have cars to get to work, to take the children to school and to go about their daily lives. Cars are a necessity for very many of our constituents. We need to think about who the people are who drive older diesels. They will mainly be constituents who are perhaps less well-off, which is why they are driving an older car that is a bit more economical. It is really important that we provide mechanisms to help constituents on lower incomes transition to cleaner vehicles, and I very much hope that we will.

In May 2011, I held a Westminster Hall debate on ultra-low emission vehicles. The then Transport Minister replied to the debate by saying that the Department had “two objectives”, which were “to create growth and to cut carbon.”—[Official Report, 10 May 2011; Vol. 527, c. 382WH.]

Those objectives are both excellent. I hope that today the Minister, who I know really cares about this issue and is determined to make progress on it, will perhaps let us know about a third objective to go alongside the Department’s former second objective of cutting carbon—namely, to improve air quality. That would be very helpful.

I want to press the Minister on the scale of our country’s ambition and policy on ultra-low emission vehicles. When I held that Westminster Hall debate some five-and-a-half years ago, I noted that the Committee on Climate Change had said that the United Kingdom should aim to have 1.7 million ultra-low emission electric vehicles on our roads by 2020. At the time there were only 57,000, and I said that the total of 57,000 was a tiny fraction of the then 28.4 million cars on our roads. I also noted that Japan had the much higher goal that 20% of all its vehicles would be electric or plug-in hybrids by 2020. It is important that we have world-leading ambition in this area so that, first, we get clean air, and secondly, absolutely critically, the United Kingdom is right at the forefront of benefiting—to ensure that we have good jobs, economic prosperity and growth—from this industry, which is taking off around the world.

Staying with the far east, China’s goal is to have 5 million all-electric and plug-in vehicles on its roads by 2020, and a number of Chinese companies are already working actively in that area. Zhejiang Geely has bought the London Taxi Company and is making the electric TX4 Euro 5 London taxi cabs, which will be launched in the middle of next year.

China Daily has referred to Norway and the Netherlands as “leading electric vehicle growth in Europe”.

I am disappointed that China does not believe that the United Kingdom is in that position and I look forward, with interest, to what my hon. Friend the Minister will say on that when she winds up. Norway and the Netherlands plan to phase out diesel vehicles entirely by 2025, as do, at the city level, Paris, Madrid, Athens and Mexico City. On the bus front, it is good to see that the Chinese battery company, BYD Company or Build Your Dreams, has teamed up with Alexander Dennis, the British bus company, to bring electric buses to London, Liverpool and Nottingham. I echo what the Chair of the Select Committee said about the need for joined-up, cross-Government action within this area, but I am most concerned about how we are tracking whether the United Kingdom is on target to meet our 2020 objectives. I would like reassurance that there is a real mechanism to look at that, and that, where we are falling short, Ministers are getting their heads together to take the appropriate action to ensure that we are a world leader in this area not just for our constituents’ health but for the benefit of the United Kingdom’s economy.

2.11 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as ever, to see you in the Chair, Mr Betts. I was not a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee when it prepared this report, although I have subsequently joined and was there for the evidence session on Tuesday, when the Minister once again reassured us that air pollution was a top priority for her Department and, indeed, for the Government. Some of us remain to be convinced, including the courts, as we have seen with the recent ClientEarth proceedings and with the news that the European Commission is taking the UK Government to court for their failures in dealing with the Volkswagen scandal.

In its response to the report, DEFRA described its air quality plan for nitrogen dioxide as “an ambitious plan”, which rather begs the question why it was snuck out on the last day of Parliament before last year’s Christmas recess, hidden in a flurry of written ministerial statements. We will, no doubt, get a similar flurry next week. In its response, DEFRA also rejected the Committee’s call for a comprehensive strategy on the grounds that: “The national air quality plan for nitrogen dioxide already sets out a comprehensive plan”.

But, as we discovered on Tuesday, it only covers NOx. It was disappointing that the Minister did not seem to appreciate, when we spoke on Tuesday, that it was time to update the 2007 plan, which covers all air pollutants. It was more reassuring that the Minister of State, Department for Transport seemed to accept that it was time to do so.

It was also worrying how many times the Government’s response to the report was simply to repeat: “£2 billion has been committed since 2011”, with little mention of future plans and funding. DEFRA’s contribution, the air quality grant scheme to support local authority action, went down from £3.1 million in 2012-13 to just £0.5 million last year—a funding cut of 84%.

The Select Committee report expressed concerns about weak national leadership and evidence from the ClientEarth court case suggests that it is the Treasury that has been leading on air quality policy, not DEFRA, by blocking measures to reduce pollution levels. If the Treasury is not prepared to listen to the public health arguments and the moral arguments that we are facing a real emergency, perhaps it needs reminding of the £20 billion that air pollution costs the UK economy every year—10 times the amount that the Government boast they have spent on improving air quality in five years.
Ministers should not need to be dragged through the courts twice to realise that their air quality plan is just not good enough. Ministers’ optimism has little basis in reality. Last year, DEFRA decided that just eight of the 43 air quality zones would still exceed legal limits for NOx in 2020, yet just one year earlier, 28 zones were still expected to be non-compliant. The reason for their belief in this rapid improvement was due to new modelling. Ministers were warned that if real-world emissions were much higher than expected, 22 additional zones would exceed the legal limit, and we now know that diesel emissions are up to 12 times the legal limit. Why did Ministers choose to base their plans on such optimistic assumptions? Why did they try to block European Union legislation on random inspections of vehicles’ real-world emissions? Why did they support loopholes that give car companies permission to pollute well above legal limits into the next decade? Why are Ministers still ignoring passenger cars, even though they are responsible for 29% of NOx emissions in the UK? The answer, as we learnt from the ClientEarth court case, is that Ministers were not trying to reduce air pollution levels to safer levels, to limit the damage to people’s health, or to prevent premature deaths. For the Government, this was simply a bureaucratic exercise to avoid EU fines and further court action. My constituents and all our constituents are paying the price because Ministers decided that, to meet this technical requirement, they only had to worry about five cities: Southampton, Derby, Leeds, Nottingham and Birmingham.

Yet, as every Bristolian knows, we are never far from the top of the list of most congested cities. Parts of Bristol regularly exceed nitrogen dioxide limits and the World Health Organisation lists Bristol as one of the most polluted cities in the UK for particulate matter. Only this month, the city was warned that it was facing its worst air pollution levels in a decade, with the Government’s index scoring us a worrying nine out of 10. The consequences are clear. According to the British Lung Foundation, people in Bristol are 16% more likely to die of lung cancer than the national average, 12% more likely to be admitted to hospital with asthma and 40% more likely to be admitted to hospital with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. A recent study indicated that nitrogen dioxide and particulates are responsible for 300 premature deaths in Bristol annually—8.5% of all deaths in Bristol each year. Perhaps the Minister would highlight to her Treasury colleagues the fact that air pollution costs Bristol £84 million a year.

The British Lung Foundation has expressed to me that only two schools in Bristol have air pollution monitors within 10 metres. There are three schools in my constituency alone in areas where nitrogen dioxide levels are illegally high. Thankfully, we now have a Mayor, Marvin Rees, who is committed to tackling our air quality crisis and has cross-party support across Bristol City Council for a clean air zone. Bristol has responded to the clean air zone framework consultation, has applied for air quality grants and is working with Core Cities on a comprehensive list of recommendations, although it is worth noting that the Mayor has written to me saying that it is a shame that core cities are required to compete against each other for air quality grants.

Bristol’s cabinet member for transport has recently announced with First Bus that routes along Fishponds Road, one of the busiest streets in my constituency, would benefit from a new fleet of low-carbon buses, so the council does understand the need to work with transport providers and taxi fleets. However, the Mayor, like the experts who gave evidence to the Committee, has made it clear that the council needs support from national Government to strengthen legal powers, fund investment, work with vehicle manufacturers and help with real-world data if we are to design effective clean air zones.

To conclude, I welcome the new joint air quality unit between DEFRA and the Department for Transport, and the recognition from Ministers that we need a cross-departmental approach. It was disappointing, however, that DEFRA refused to answer my written parliamentary questions on the work of the clean growth committee, in order to “protect the integrity of the policymaking process”. The public have a right to know whether Ministers are suggesting solutions to a problem that is killing tens of thousands of people every year. Is not such a complex problem that affects so many of us best addressed through open engagement, rather than through such cloak and dagger secrecy?

The Government’s response to the Committee’s report assured us that: “Specific actions have been developed over the course of these meetings”.

So I do hope that we can hear more from the Minister about exactly what those specific actions are.

There is common agreement now that air pollution is an issue that we absolutely must tackle. Perhaps it is now time for a new clean air Act to be passed, some 50 years after the last one. I urge DEFRA to come back to Parliament with a comprehensive, forward-looking plan that includes detailed actions and specific timeframes. It really is time for an end to the complacency.

2.19 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on a comprehensive and valuable report on the air quality crisis that we face in this country. I am pleased that the Committee is continuing to take evidence on DEFRA’s plans following the High Court ruling that the Government have comprehensively failed to address the issue.

There is a lot in the report, and I will briefly address a couple of its recommendations on vehicle emissions. The deterioration in the quality and safety of the air we breathe, particularly in cities such as Manchester, is increasingly acknowledged as a public health crisis. We know that air pollution causes 40,000 premature deaths a year, that air pollution is linked to cancer, asthma, strokes and heart disease, and that 3,000 of our schools are on sites with dangerous levels of air pollution.

The report is particularly timely in light of the EU referendum result. There is no doubt that the EU has helped us address air quality. EU regulations such as the 2008 ambient air quality directive have been important tools for campaigners to hold the Government to account. Just this week, EU Environment Ministers approved a
new directive on air pollution that revises targets for member states in line with the Gothenburg protocol. The directive is predicted to halve premature deaths in the EU due to air pollution by 2030, so the EU has a strong track record of action on this issue. Working closely with our EU partners will be critical in the coming years, which is why there is such concern that, following the referendum, we are now at a crossroads. The scale of the challenge is huge.

From speaking to people such as Manchester Friends of the Earth and the British Lung Foundation, I know there is a real fear that leaving the EU could see us return to being the dirty man of Europe, notwithstanding what was said earlier about the repeal Bill. I agree with the Labour environment campaign and ClientEarth that the prospect of leaving the EU reinforces the need for a new clean air Act to bring the EU and World Health Organisation guidelines into UK law to ensure that we do not lose those safeguards in the long term.

The report raises a couple of issues that relate to Manchester. First, I welcome recommendation 9, which calls on the Government to extend new powers and support to councils that are ready to address air quality. Restricting the provision of clean air zones to five cities outside London limits the scope for supporting urban centres such as Manchester to play our part in reducing air pollution.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): We are not restricting it. The difference is that the Government are requiring it of those five cities. Any part of the country can introduce a clean air zone if it wishes.

Jeff Smith: What we do not get in Manchester is the support and resource to do it, as the other five cities do. I was told in July 2016 that Greater Manchester was denied funding and support for a clean air zone because of predictions that the city region would not break the EU directive limit. However, it emerged during the recent High Court case that DEFRA originally included Greater Manchester in the list of clean air zones, only to be told by the Treasury that we cannot afford it. Also, DEFRA’s air quality projections for Manchester have been widely discredited because they are based on static car usage and no population growth—in fact, Greater Manchester’s population has grown at double the UK average over the past decade. Despite our fantastic progress on public transport, particularly our Metrolink, 58% of journeys within Greater Manchester are still made by car. Now that DEFRA is having to revisit its air quality strategy, I urge the Minister to think again and support Manchester in implementing a clean air zone.

Secondly, we all got it wrong on diesel vehicles, and the Government now need to take stronger and faster action. The direction of travel across the world is away from diesel cars and towards low-emission vehicles. As has been mentioned, just last week Paris, Mexico City, Madrid and Athens joined Tokyo in moving to ban diesel vehicles from their city centres.

Recommendation 19 calls for a national diesel scrappage scheme, paired with grants for purchasing low-emission vehicles. Funding for new refuelling infrastructure for low-carbon vehicles is welcome, but it is clearly not enough on its own to get high-polluting diesel cars off the road. In Manchester we have taken promising steps to modernise our bus fleet and increase the number of charging locations for electric cars, but we need the Government to show more leadership. It is time for the Government to follow our international partners and take serious action. A scrappage scheme for diesel cars would demonstrate such action, so I repeat the calls made by other Members to reconsider that proposal.

I will not speak for long, but I return to the High Court case brought by the lawyers at ClientEarth. The case exposes the Government’s lack of ambition to address our air pollution crisis. The verdict shows that the Government are committed to scraping by but, following the EU referendum result, that approach will not be enough.

Recommendation 7 sums it up perfectly: “the Government must accord poor air quality a priority commensurate with the toll on the nation’s health and environment.” That is absolutely what we need now.

2.26 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the report. I serve on the Environmental Audit Committee, and I have proposed the Clean Air Bill that, in essence, calls for the development of sustainable public, private and commercial transport by road, rail, air and sea. Obviously, the background is diesel pollution. The Clean Air Act 1956 was passed to confront the 12,000 deaths in London in one year, 1952. Now we are seeing 9,400 deaths in London, and 40,000 across Britain, every year. We are looking at a silent killer on an industrial scale. At best, the Government’s position is complacent and negligent. They have been dragged into court and forced to abide by EU standards. The strategy is minimalist, rather than an holistic approach that confronts the real problem. We know that people are dying, be it through heart attacks, lung disease or strokes. Unborn babies are being exposed through the placental wall.

The Select Committee Chair mentioned VW, and it is appalling that VW’s NOx sensors were allowing 40 times the EU pollution limit. As I mentioned earlier, the US has taken firm legal action and sued VW for $12 billion, but the EU and the UK are doing virtually nothing vis-à-vis VW. We know that we need to take action.

I have been working in conjunction with the Health Alliance UK on Climate Change, which includes the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, The Lancet, The BMJ, the Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of General Practitioners. We have seen the huge protests by doctors against diesel deaths. People are getting wise to the fact that they are driving around inside silent killers, and that politicians of various hues have overseen an increase in diesel cars from a market share of some 10% in 2000 to 50% of new cars now. Nearly 40% of the UK’s power is used to give people electric trams. I want local government to be empowered to provide more infrastructure, such as modern electric trams. I want local government to be
able to restrict diesel and heavy-polluting cars and vehicles from entering areas where there is particular vulnerability. I want the Government to introduce complete infrastructure for electric and hydrogen vehicles. As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) said, electricity must be provided for ships that are coming into port and polluting local areas. There is another debate to be had about ships. Ships in the North sea create more pollution, diesel and otherwise, than the totality of transport in Britain.

We need to think about the wider picture. The Chair of the Committee mentioned agriculture and methane from cows; we must think about how to manage that as well, by promoting vegetarianism and encouraging best practice. We need to reduce the massive subsidies to the fossil fuel industry and the production of methane through agriculture. I know that people have been reconsidering Heathrow airport. A lot of the testing for the airport was based on old-fashioned modelling that underestimated the amount of emissions from cars roughly fourfold, did not even factor in emissions from the planes themselves, which will increase in number from 480,000 to 700,000 a year.

It really is not good enough. We have seen some action elsewhere: Paris, Madrid, Mexico City and Athens are seeking to ban diesel within the next decade. There has been talk in Germany; a motion was passed in the Bundestag to stop the sale of new diesel cars altogether across the EU from 2030. There are calls, whether caused by Brexit or otherwise, for the Government to support investment in hydrogen electric cars. In Swansea, we welcome the electrification of the railways, but it will not happen until 2024, and the trains will be diesel and electrified. Meanwhile, in Germany, they are developing the first hydrogen trains. We are absolutely miles behind and pretending to be at the front of the game.

The basic point that needs to be made is that we need a new, comprehensive fiscal strategy that encourages a clean and healthy future in terms of consumption and production and discourages bad, unhealthy and deadly behaviour. Since 1992, there has been basically no difference in fuel tariff between diesel and petrol, and despite inflation there has been no growth in either of them since 2010, so the real cost of diesel—the cost of promoting death—has been cut. We need differentials to emerge between diesel and petrol, and particularly in order to encourage electric and hydrogen.

I know that time is pressing for the Front-Bench speeches, so I will bring my comments to a close. I completely support what has been said in the report, and I think that much more must be done. I will circulate my detailed Clean Air Bill for comments and contributions, to help push forward on this growing problem for people not just in London but across Britain who want to protect themselves and their children from unnecessary death.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We now move to the Front-Bench speeches. We are not restricted to concluding this debate by 3 o’clock; the two debates together may take three hours. There are 10 minutes for each of the Front-Bench speeches on this report, and the Chair of the Select Committee has the right to make a brief response at the end.
with absolute clarity the actions required across Government if the public are to be reassured that the Government are committed to improving air quality substantially. It is worth noting that parts of London, such as Oxford Street, now represent the most polluted environments in the world. The scale of the challenge facing the UK Government in England on emissions is immense, but the public will be interested to know that the UK Government are largely not addressing it.

In particular, the Committee was told that DEFRA’s plans for clean air zones will impose a one-size-fits-all category D model on cities from Southampton to Leeds. In London, there are also plans for an ultra-low emission zone, but our evidence demonstrated that few in power appear to understand what that means. We also heard evidence suggesting that the UK Government must give local authorities greater control to implement policy flexibly, in order to tailor measures better to local circumstances. For example, we took evidence suggesting that cities would find it more effective to limit vehicle access at certain times of day or target specific bus routes rather than to implement less considered blanket bans on access.

It was therefore remarkable for us to find that the UK Government have planning powers to levy charges discouraging the use of vehicles in specific areas only for the five cities with the highest levels of pollution, although it is known that dozens of identifiable areas breach current EU pollution limits. That finding sits at odds with many developing nations, and indeed with policies being implemented now to address pollution in cities such as Athens, Paris, Rome and Madrid. If the UK Government are to avoid having their air quality policies left in tatters, DEFRA and the Department for Communities and Local Government must fund wider programmes such as those supported by the local sustainable transport fund, which has demonstrated that it delivers benefits cost-effectively.

We also looked at specific measures to reduce emissions from shipping, agriculture, the building industry, public transport and cars. We endorsed the UK Government’s support for a wide range of technologies, including the provision of fiscal incentives such as lower fuel duty rates for cleaner fuels. We viewed positively new technologies such as gas-powered or hybrid vehicles and fully electric vehicles that can offer solutions for different transport needs. Sadly, however, the UK Government appear to be taking a technologically passive approach that is inhibiting support for the necessary research, development and implementation of low-emission technologies.

Indeed, the UK Government’s response to our inquiry has been disappointing, if not lamentable. Not only have they failed to address the Committee’s recommendations, but they recently lost two cases in the High Court in respect of their failures to implement appropriate measures to limit pollution. On 8 December, the European Union initiated legal proceedings against the UK Government for their failure to apply penalties against Volkswagen and, more worryingly, for failing to disclose full information to the EU Commission. Those failures and omissions are instructive. They are also a damning indictment of ineffectiveness—all the more so since the Minister herself told the Committee only this week that air quality was her “top priority”.

We have found that DEFRA’s approach is based on predictive assumptions that are too cautious. A history of failure to translate theoretical standards into cleaner air means that it must keep its assumptions under review. At the current rate of change, it will be many, many years before ultra-low emission vehicles replace all the types of vehicles and heavy plant currently causing pollution. Faster progress could be made if further measures were introduced to encourage people to buy newer, perhaps unfamiliar and in many cases more costly, technologies. The UK Government must rise to that challenge or face the prospect of losing further credibility in the courts.

2.42 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Betts.

While the High Court judgment on 2 November has subsequently reinforced the points made in the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee’s report, the Committee must be commemorated for the seriousness with which it has looked into air quality and not least for taking further evidence on Tuesday. I know that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and the Committee have made a number of recommendations, all of which the Opposition would support or even go further on under our plan for action. I note that the Government have failed to take the advice in the Committee’s recommendations and plan, despite having had 239 days since the report was published to put a plan in place.

The Government’s buzz-phrase about leaving the environment better than they found it is already wearing very thin, as they have had six years to make significant changes in this area and have now been told to do so on three occasions by the courts—the European Court too, we must remember. The Government have been minimalistic in their response and have been told by the judiciary to think again. They have been exposed, not only in their lack of progress on improving our air quality, but in their deliberate attempts to water down improved standards for the 2030 EU directive, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) mentioned. The Government sought, through their MEPs, to adjust the ceiling on emissions to give Britain “flexibility” and allowed them to “adjust their inventory” if the country looked likely to breach targets. That is a scandal, and the Government must be held to account for it.

In the light of the Brexit discussions currently taking place, the question of exactly what form of regulation we will have over our air quality in the future is extremely worrying. While we are talking about leaving the EU, we must also be cognisant of what we have heard this afternoon about China’s air quality. If we are signing up to trade deals that will pollute elsewhere around the globe, as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned, we should be incredibly concerned. We must ensure that environmental measures are written into all trade deals to improve international standards.

Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that in the case of CETA—the comprehensive economic and trade agreement between Canada and the EU—it is imperative that we build in air quality standards and compliance with the Paris standards, so that investor powers do not simply trump environmental imperatives?
Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. It is really important that we demonstrate in all our international agreements and dialogue that we can lead on this agenda. I want the UK to be at the forefront, but tragically we are lagging behind.

It is remarkable that, in addition to what has happened, the Government have failed to recognise the weakness in their own plan, despite warnings from the courts to take action over poor air quality. As we have heard, they had to be dragged to the High Court again this year to defend the indefensible: a plan that sought to limit air quality improvements in just five areas outside London, when levels of nitrogen oxides in 37 out of 43 zones are exceeding European standards. We also need plans in other areas to address particulates and ammonia, as we have heard today.

The Government have consistently lacked ambition and tried to avoid their obligations to address this serious health concern. The cost is early mortality. We have heard about the 52,500 premature deaths and about the global scale of respiratory and cardiac disease, which kill 30 times the number of people killed in traffic accidents. The number of people who endure respiratory disease from air pollution has not been calculated, but that is a serious issue too. People are gasping for breath day by day. A young person with asthma, an older person with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—the suffering of those individuals cannot be overstated. I worked in respiratory medicine for 20 years and I can tell hon. Members how life-limiting such illnesses can be. We have also heard about the cost to the NHS of up to £20 billion—ten times what the Government are prepared to put into mitigation processes. The Government’s approach does not really recognise the scale of the crisis. Every life matters, and we need them to use every tool at their disposal to bring about fundamental change on their watch.

Let me welcome the Committee’s work and set out what a Labour Government would do. We would introduce a clean air Act, because we understand the urgency of the matter. We would mainstream environmental standards, not just in transport but across all Departments, and ensure that they are integrated into our industrial strategy. We heard from the Prime Minister this week that, remarkably, after six and a half years the Government have not got an industrial strategy. What discussions has the Minister had with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about the future of the car industry? As we have heard this afternoon, so many countries, including Norway, the Netherlands and Germany, are making radical changes to clean up their transport systems. They will be decades ahead of us, so it is important that we take urgent measures now. Why did the Government not intervene on their own plans when they learned about the fourfold shortfall between laboratory testing levels and real emissions, and revise their targets? DEFRA should publish the data on real-world emissions and should take seriously the Volkswagen issue, to ensure that those issues do not occur again.

A Labour Government would go further than just talking about scrappage schemes. We know that those schemes provide an economic boost and are very important, but we would look at a retrofitting programme to give vehicles more access to opportunities to clean up their emissions, and we would put the right financial drivers in the system to achieve that. We would have clean air zones, as many of my hon. Friends have said today—not just in five areas, but right across the 43 areas. We would empower local communities, to ensure that the risk of failure is taken out of the system. We need a “can do” attitude from the Government, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington said, not a “can’t do” attitude.

I was taken by the Select Committee’s astute comment about the “polluter pays” principle. When that principle, which is one of the core strands of the Government’s strategy, applies to buses, it is the passenger who pays, so passengers will opt to use alternative vehicles. Avoiding unintended consequences and closing loopholes is so important. That is the responsibility of the Government, but it has clearly not worked so far.

There are so many things that Labour would want to do to improve the wider strategies. We need proper investment into moving people into walk-cycle strategies, and we need to reform the public transport system, as we have heard from other colleagues. At the centre of all this is economics, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) highlighted. What discussions has the Minister had with the Treasury to ensure that the whole process of cleaning up our air is properly supported, and what was the result of those discussions?

I could talk about agriculture, but the Chair of the Select Committee has made such a good case already. The fact that our air is so polluted affects our whole biodiversity system. Will the Minister say when we will see the long-overdue food and farming plan? It was promised before Christmas; I hope we will see it by then.

Finally, I wish to highlight the issue of measurement. In its response to the report, the Government said:

“Access to data and information is essential to enabling informed choices to be made on the best approaches to tackling the sources of, and reducing exposure to, pollution.”

Why was the air quality monitoring budget in 2011-12 twice what it is now? Why has the number of projects dropped from 42 to 12? It is so important to monitor air pollution, especially around schools, where young people’s lungs are developing and susceptible to pollutants. We must take seriously the Volkswagen issue, to ensure that those issues do not occur again.

Tough action could be taken to clean up our air, and would be taken under Labour. The World Health Organisation describes air pollution as a “public health emergency”. The Select Committee said that the Government have failed to take a coherent, cross-Government approach. The High Court judge said that “the Secretary of State fell into error”.

We say to the Government: clean up your act and clean up our air. I have been so encouraged by the ambition demonstrated in the debate thus far. I trust that the Minister will build confidence with clear direction today.

5.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dehenna Davison): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the Liaison Committee for granting this debate to my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish).
Improving air quality is my top priority and I welcome the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee’s interest in this matter. Such interest is not unique to the Select Committee. Air quality has improved significantly over recent decades, through the regulatory frameworks put in place by successive Governments, starting with the Clean Air Act 1956 and continuing as we signed up to the international protocols that have been continually revised, usually brought into place by EU regulations. We have supported them. The standards have got tougher and I am determined that we will improve air quality further.

We are showing leadership in driving improved air-quality standards internationally through the Gothenburg protocol. As a result, in common with the rest of Europe, we now have legally binding targets to reduce UK air pollutant emissions by 2020, and to reduce them even further by 2030. The targets will be incorporated into our legislation by the end of June 2018. I will set out further actions in due course, including publishing the UK Government’s air pollution action plan, which includes all pollutants, and we must do that by no later than March 2019.

The Government’s ambition is that ours will be the first generation to leave the natural environment of England in a better state than we found it, which is why we are developing a 25-year environment plan that will include a strong focus on clean air. Our most immediate challenge, though, is to reduce the number of local pollutant hotspots caused by vehicle emissions. That is why the UK led the development of the real driving emissions test. From next year, vehicles will have to meet emissions limits in real driving conditions across a wide range of typical operating conditions. We have also committed more than £2 billion to increase the uptake of ultra-low emission vehicles and to support greener transport schemes. In addition, in the autumn statement we announced a further £290 million to support electric vehicles, low-emission buses and taxis, and alternative fuels. As has already been mentioned, earlier this year we set up the joint air quality unit with the Department for Transport. The unit is focusing on reducing local concentrations of air pollutants from vehicles.

In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), we are absolutely determined to maintain international leadership on the uptake of ultra-low emission vehicles. I recognise the figures he cites for Japan, but we have certainly been the largest market in the European Union this year, and the Government are increasing their support. In answer to my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee, the UK already has the largest rapid-charging network in Europe. Alongside the comprehensive package of measures from the Office for Low Emission Vehicles, we intend to introduce in the modern transport Bill powers to regulate technical standards of infrastructure to ensure the easy compatibility of vehicles, and to require provision at motorway service areas and fuel retailers.

Following the outcome of the judicial review, the Government are developing a new and more ambitious national plan for reducing local concentrations of air pollutants. We are working at pace to update our modelling, in the light of the latest evidence, to inform our plan. Many options are being worked up for us to consider, including fiscal matters. We have established a cross-Whitehall approach, and I have personally arranged to meet Ministers from the Department of Health, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the Department for Communities and Local Government. After those meetings and encouragement from DEFRA, the inter-ministerial group for clean growth was reconvened. We have started to meet monthly and are meeting again next month.

Officials from all the relevant Departments are working to consider what policies and funding will be needed to achieve our goals. Members should realise that the focus will be on carbon and air quality; I recognise that, as Members have said, carbon has been the focus in the past, without consideration of other matters. Meanwhile, DEFRA will continue to influence other strategies and policies as they develop. For example, we recently proposed a consultation on the impact of generators, which I suggest may have influenced a significant drop in the number of contracts being awarded for diesel generation in a recent capacity market. We will consult on the revised plan by 24 April, at which point I am sure the Select Committee will want to discuss matters further. The final plan will be in place by the end of July.

Clean air zones are a key element in our approach to reducing local concentrations of air pollutants, and local authorities already have the power to introduce them. I am pleased to say that Manchester is already considering introducing such a zone, without the Government having mandated it to do so. To support local authorities in creating them, and to ensure a degree of national consistency, we have published a draft framework for clean air zones. The consultation on the framework recently closed, and we received more than 200 responses, which we are now considering.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan) said that we would end up with a one-size-fits-all category D model, but that is not the case. Clean air zone standards will be varied by need; some will be category B, some category C and some category D. We will be requiring five cities—Birmingham, Derby, Leeds, Nottingham and Southampton—to implement clean air zones, and as part of our updates to the national plan we will look at whether we need to mandate more zones. As I said to the Select Committee, our indicative modelling suggests that that will be the case, but I need to discuss matters with the relevant local authorities before announcing anything to the House.

My hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee mentioned some other elements. Birmingham City Council is trialling the conversion of diesel to liquefied petroleum gas with taxis, but I am led to believe that it does not work technically for most cars. I know that costings have been done in the past for income-based scrappage, or a scrappage scheme more generally, but the Transport for London proposal about which my hon. Friend heard would not really work because it was talking about the exchange being for an Oyster card.

Alongside national Government action, I am encouraging local councils to do all they can to use existing powers to improve air quality and deliver real change, tailored to their local communities. Local authorities have opportunities to think about local land use and their decisions on planning, roads and, indeed, the local air quality management areas they themselves declare.
Rachael Maskell: Alongside giving that opportunity to local authorities, what resourcing is the Minister providing for them to take that work forward?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady will be aware that elements of funding are available as part of the air quality grant programme. The sum has increased at least sixfold since the previous grant last year. If we have good enough bids, we hope to work with the Treasury to consider how we can develop that funding further.

I recently sent letters to 230 local authorities with air quality management areas, seeking updates on their plans, and on their plans to move to compliance. From the number and quality of responses that I have already received, I have been pleased to note that positive action is being taken in many places. Mid Devon District Council has taken a lead role in the region’s low emissions partnership; Rushcliffe Borough Council is taking forward a number of transport and educational initiatives, while also reducing the council’s own impacts; and Norwich City Council has recorded a significant reduction in nitrogen dioxide after improving traffic flow and introducing a new fleet of Euro 6 buses. The Public Health Minister and I have written jointly to all directors of public health to encourage them to show their influence on air quality at a local level. The Mayor of Bristol replied to my letter and I am pleased to say I will meet him next month, alongside MPs from Bristol.

There are other matters to consider, such as reducing emissions of particulate matter, which is also an important priority for me. The largest source of those emissions now is domestic solid fuel, such as wood and coal burned in open fires and stoves, the use of which has increased significantly in recent years. I am considering a range of options to address this issue, and as a first step I plan to engage with stove manufacturers and retailers to understand the issues and identify where improvements could be made through industry-led action on cleaner appliances and fuel. In particular, one of the messages that I would like to give out before the Christmas holidays is for people to think about the choice of wood that they use when they have open fires, and to use wood with the lowest moisture possible, to reduce the production of soot and dust.

With regard to farming, our target is to reduce ammonia emissions, which have already decreased significantly over many years. However, we know there is more to do. As a first step, DEFRA recently launched a farming ammonia reduction grant, to encourage the agriculture sector to help drive reductions in ammonia emissions.

I note the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton raised on the use of fertiliser and Honiton has pointed out, co-ordinated action is needed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton has pointed out, co-ordinated action is absolutely needed, and I can assure him that that work is under way.

In that work, we have the backing of our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who just last month said to the House:

“We have taken action, but there is more to do and we will do it.”—[Official Report, 2 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 887.]

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I call the Chair of the Select Committee to wind up.

3.2 pm

Neil Parish: I thank the Minister; the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell); and the “shadow Minister” from Caithness, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan)—I have elevated him, but he is a very good member of the Select Committee. I also thank the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell); 3.2 pm
with plans in that regard, because when they present
their plans, first in April and then finally in July, we will
need some real plans to tackle air quality, so that we are
not back in this room, or elsewhere in this Parliament,
debating this issue year in, year out, while too many
people's health continues to be affected by very poor air
quality.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee of Session 2015-16,
Air Quality, HC 479, and the Government response, HC 665.

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### Greyhound Welfare

[Andrew Rosindell in the Chair]

3.5 pm

**Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to
move,

That this House has considered the Second Report of the
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee of Session 2015-16,
Greyhound Welfare, HC 478, and the Government response,
HC 133.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship,
Mr Rosindell. There are around 15,000 active racing
greyhounds in the UK today. Although there has been a
sustained decline in the popularity of greyhound racing
in recent decades, the sport continues to draw crowds
and in 2014 it supported a £1.3 billion off-course turnover
for bookmakers. I will concentrate a little later on the
amount of money being made from the betting on
greyhounds and ask whether enough of it is getting
back to support greyhound welfare and retirement.

Animal welfare standards expected by the public
today are higher than at any time in the past. However,
within the greyhound industry, there are sometimes two
conflicting priorities—the welfare and integrity standards
during a dog's racing career; and the view of a greyhound
as a commercial betting asset. The Welfare of Racing
Greyhounds Regulations 2010 introduced minimum
standards for all greyhound tracks in the country.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee
published its report on greyhound welfare in February.
It focused on the effectiveness of the 2010 regulations
and their success in safeguarding racing greyhound
welfare standards. It was timely, as it fed into the
Government's overdue review of the 2010 regulations,
which was published in September.

I will focus today on three of the Committee's
recommendations: the need for greater transparency;
kennelling standards away from the track, as well as on
the track; and the financing of the industry. Greyhound
racing tracks operate within a hybrid or two-tier system.
The majority of racing tracks—24—are licensed by the
Greyhound Board of Great Britain, or GBGB. That
means that they operate under the GBGB's rules of
racing and are subject to inspection by the organisation.
The standards that the GBGB sets at tracks are also
independently accredited by the United Kingdom
Accreditation Service, and supported by the work of
track veterinarians. Any track that meets the required
standards may apply to be licensed by the GBGB.

In England, there are also a small number of independent
tracks that are not licensed by the GBGB but regulated
and inspected by local authorities. These tracks mostly
cater for local hobbyists, who keep racing greyhounds
mainly as a hobby.

Although different licensing arrangements exist, tracks
under both systems must comply with the 2010 regulations.
I accept that those regulations have succeeded in improving
the welfare of greyhounds at tracks, but there is still
much to be done. More transparency is definitely needed
in the industry. There are currently no sources of reliable
data on greyhound welfare in the public domain. It is
therefore difficult to assess accurately the current level
of welfare provision or to gauge improvements or
deterioration over time.
The Dogs Trust believes that approximately 3,500 greyhounds are unaccounted for every year in the UK. However, as statistics are not published, the true scale of the problem is difficult to assess. The regulations must be amended to require the publication of essential welfare data relating to injury, euthanasia and rehoming. DEFRA’s approach is to rely on a non-regulatory agreement with the Greyhound Board of Great Britain to publish statistics from 2018.

Neil Parish

Neil Parish: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman saw the “Panorama” documentary that showed a continuing problem with doping in the industry. I know that the board carries out some random drug testing, but doping is still very much being used by unscrupulous owners to speed up or in some cases slow down the dogs. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that we need much more information about the extent to which doping is a problem and that we need action to tackle it?

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I do not know if the hon. Gentleman saw the “Panorama” documentary that showed a continuing problem with doping in the industry. We know that the board carries out some random drug testing, but doping is still very much being used by unscrupulous owners to speed up or in some cases slow down the dogs. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that we need much more information about the extent to which doping is a problem and that we need action to tackle it?

Neil Parish: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. The Committee visited a GBGB track and we also went to an independent track. While we were at the GBGB track we saw the doping testing taking place. We saw the vets checking the welfare of the greyhound and its ability to race. On the day we went I do not think we could fault the amount of testing and inspection that was going on, but we want to be absolutely certain that on the days when we do not attend the track, the same process is taking place. When it comes to doping, welfare and how many greyhounds are racing, the transparency of the data will tell us where the greyhounds are and how many there are so that if there is a problem we can have the greyhounds tested afterwards as well. There is a real issue.

After what we saw, we believe that the industry is in some ways moving in the right direction and is perhaps not as prone to as much doping as has taken place in the past, but we want to be absolutely certain that it does not take place. It is not only the welfare of the greyhound that is at stake. Doping is an attempt to distort genuine greyhound racing and the result of the race.

I call on the Minister to explain why statistics will not be published until 2018 when the data are already available. In addition, the Government’s latest regulation review did not take the opportunity to extend transparency of reporting to the independent tracks in England. From the industry’s point of view and for the welfare of the greyhound it would be so good to have those figures. If there is nothing to hide, why on earth can we not have the figures sooner? I know that the Minister is very keen on animal welfare. If we had transparency, many of us would feel happier about the situation.

Kennelling is important not only at the track but at the trainers’ kennels. Greyhounds spend approximately 95% of their time at trainers’ kennels. There are pressing welfare issues facing the industry away from the track, and kennelling arrangements differ substantially between the two systems. Although the Government have a non-regulatory agreement with the industry to develop a standard for trainers’ kennels, we are extremely concerned that there is no requirement for this to be used by the independent greyhound sector. Independent trainers’ kennels do not require licensing or inspection. We have concerns that the 2010 regulations do not go beyond racing tracks.

In our report, we urge the Government to extend the 2010 regulations beyond racetracks to cover standards at all trainers’ kennels—both GBGB and independent trainers’ kennels. We recommend that common welfare standards be developed for all kennels and that an independent body verify those standards. The Government are not treating this issue with the severity it deserves. We are disappointed that DEFRA has not recommended extending kennelling standards to the independent greyhound sector as part of its post-implementation review.

I now turn to the financing of greyhound welfare and the role of bookmakers. Greyhounds are bred for the sole purpose of racing—in other words, to provide a betting product. In our eyes, this means that bookmakers have some responsibility to support post-racing welfare, particularly in the area of rehoming. The bookmaking industry made a net profit of some £230 million from greyhound racing in 2014 with a margin of 18%—a margin that is significantly higher and less volatile than a number of other sports. It paid back around £33 million to the greyhound industry in fees for the rights to televise races, and a voluntary contribution for greyhound welfare was paid by some bookmakers.

There has been a decline in the voluntary levy in the past 10 years. In 2015 contributions were £6.9 million, down from £14 million in real terms almost a decade ago. This income stream is threatened by the growth of online and overseas betting operations, which do not tend to make the voluntary contributions. Greyhound racing is currently at the whim of bookmakers who may choose to contribute or not. The voluntary system allows bookmakers to walk away from their responsibility to the industry if the industry tries to increase the levy.

High welfare standards require financing. The onus should be on bookmakers who profit from greyhound racing to contribute financially to improving standards. I understand that discussions between the industry and bookmakers regarding the voluntary levy have now broken down. The Committee calls on the Government to introduce a statutory levy of 1% of gross turnover. This would provide a more stable income stream for animal welfare activities and create an even playing field between contributing bookmakers.

I would go as far as to say that we ought to name the bookmakers who make a contribution to greyhound welfare and those who do not. The bookies who do the right thing are contributing and ought to get some credit for it. The names of those who do not contribute should be made public. In the end, we have to make sure that there is enough money for rehoming. We have very good greyhound rehoming charities that do great work, but they need support, especially from the industry.

We went greyhound racing and we saw the race run in a reasonable way. We saw the greyhounds being checked, including when they came off the track, and we could see very little problem with the race. However, lots and lots of money is being made in online gambling. Therefore it is essential that online gambling should pay a contribution; if the race did not take place, it would not make its money. It should help with rehoming and looking after greyhounds when they finish racing. That is the biggest problem with greyhound racing: they are bred and
reared for racing, but what happens to them when they finish? Are they to be discarded or euthanized, or rehomed? We need accurate figures, and enough money for the animal welfare and rehoming organisations to be able to take the greyhounds.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I have been looking at my notes and I notice that in paragraph 79 of the report we named Betfair as one of the organisations that are shirking their responsibility. I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point that we should congratulate contributors and name and shame those who do not contribute.

Neil Parish: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who if I may say so is a great member of the Select Committee, for that point. We want to be able to publish the names of those such as Betfair that do not contribute; let us also name the organisations that do, and see what happens. I think there would be a public outcry, and those that do not contribute would be more likely to do so. We want to be assured that when the greyhounds have finished their racing career, they will be properly retired and rehomed, and there will be money to help with that. That is essential.

If greyhounds are injured in their racing career, there should be enough money to pay veterinary expenses, so that those that are able to can have a fulfilling life in retirement, and will not be euthanized just because that is the easiest thing to do. We did not conclude that we wanted to ban all greyhound racing, but we felt that there was more to be done with respect to breeding, retirement and making sure that greyhounds that have finished racing have a decent life. It is therefore essential that all parts of the betting industry should contribute.

The Committee expects the greyhound industry and its regulator to make progress on the publication of injury, traceability, retirement and euthanasia data, as I have said. Trainers’ kennels should also be inspected to a new transparent public standard. A two-year period to deliver those changes is reasonable. However, the EFRA Committee would expect an update from the GBGB within that timescale. Independent tracks are regulated by local authorities, not by the GBGB. Therefore, there is a gap in accountability and regulation. Local authorities should look to using DEFRA’s imminent consultation on updating animal establishment licensing as an opportunity to raise standards in the independent sector.

The Committee believes that the betting industry must increase its contributions. Bookmakers profiting from greyhound racing have a clear responsibility to support greyhound welfare. If a voluntary agreement cannot be struck with bookmakers, we recommend that the Government introduce a statutory levy of 1% across the industry. That would work in a similar way to the horserace betting levy.

3.24 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Rosindell, particularly as, if my memory serves me well, you take a personal interest in these matters. I am sure that apart from the usual general interest, the report will contain things of specific interest to you and your constituents.

It is good to follow the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), the Select Committee Chairman. As he did in the previous debate, he covered the vast majority of the points that the Committee wanted to make, so I shall not waste time repeating what he said. He made an excellent job of representing the Committee’s views, as he always does. I look forward to the Minister’s remarks; I am not sure that he was the architect of the Government response, but he will speak on behalf of the Department so it is none the less his. I look forward, also, to the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), the shadow Minister, and those of my fellow member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan), who is the Front-Bench spokesman for the Scottish National party on these matters.

The Select Committee Chairman made reference on page 3 of the report to a commitment to producing injury data. When the Minister was responsible for the issue he pressed GBGB to produce that, and it has said that it will do so. However, as the Chairman said, 2018 seems a long way off for data that are available now; they could be anonymised, made available and published now. On the matter of the number of dogs euthanised, I understand that animal welfare charities calculate that at the moment between 3,000 and 4,000 dogs disappear each year. When I introduced my first ten-minute rule Bill on the issue, in 1998, the figure was much higher, so there has been significant progress: but thousands of dogs still disappear, which is a cause of huge concern to those interested in animal welfare.

I must confess that I stumbled over the word “trainer’s” under recommendation 4; it looked to me as if it meant a single trainer’s kennel, whereas we are talking about all trainers’ kennels. I thought that the apostrophe should have been at the end. It could be argued that it is in the right place, but that does not suit the way I was taught English at Holyrood secondary school in Glasgow. The question of trainers’ kennels is a key issue. As the Chairman of the Select Committee outlined, the dogs are estimated to spend 90% to 95% of their time in the kennels. The Dogs Trust has produced recommendations on the welfare needs of dogs—a suitable environment and diet, the ability to exhibit normal behaviour patterns and be housed with or apart from other animals as appropriate, and that they should be protected from pain and suffering. Given that most of the dogs’ time is spent in kennels, the fact that the regulations published in 2010 do not address the issue of trainers’ kennels is a huge omission. The Government should move on that as quickly as possible.

The second paragraph of the Government’s response to the same recommendation states:

“As previously mentioned, Defra are currently considering all the evidence gathered as part of its review before considering whether any changes are needed to the 2010 Regulations.”

That reinforces the concern articulated by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton about the time within which they are responding to the issues raised by the Committee.

The question of rehoming is mentioned at the top of page 5. GBGB has already agreed to the Minister’s request to publish data on injuries, and that is welcome. However, the information is available and we would accept anonymised data for bona fide research and academic purposes, so 2018 seems a bit of a way off.
My hon. Friend the Chairman—I call him my hon. Friend for the purposes of Select Committee solidarity—made some points about the betting levy and how much it is worth. I would be grateful if the Minister could respond specifically to this point. As the Select Committee Chairman outlined, £200 million is generated and £33 million goes back to the industry, so I am not sure how significant half a million pounds is. What is the Minister’s perspective on that? The third paragraph on page 6 of the Government’s response says:

“The remote betting industry estimates that this will add about £2m to the overall transfer of value from the online betting industry to the greyhound industry.”

Is the half a million pounds coming from that £2 million, or is it additional money? I was not clear how the figures relate to each other.

In conclusion, there is widespread concern among animal welfare charities. I am sure we all received representations from the RSPCA, the League Against Cruel Sports, the Dogs Trust, Blue Cross and others. When this issue was part of the Minister’s portfolio, he took it seriously and was heavily involved. The Department’s response refers to 2017 and 2018 and having another look at things in due course, once we have a better assessment of whether the 2010 regulations have worked or not, but they clearly have worked. The vast majority of people and certainly the Select Committee believe that the regulations should be extended. They certainly should be extended to the kennels of trainers. They should be extended to bring forward data on injuries and closer scrutiny of how many dogs are disappearing, so that we can eventually get that number down to zero.

3.31 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Rosindell. I thank the EFRA Committee and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for leading the debate today. I start by thanking the great many organisations that work for greyhound welfare across the UK, including Scotland’s Greyhound Rescue, the League Against Cruel Sports, Blue Cross, the RSPCA, the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Scottish Greyhound Sanctuary, Give a Greyhound a Home, the Dogs Trust, the International Fund for Animal Welfare and West of Scotland Greyhound Welfare, which looks after greyhounds in foster homes and kennels across my area.

Greyhounds are raced until they are three to four years old. Then, many will be put down. Greyhounds are described as being very clever. They are generally very gentle, and they are fantastic with children. Two 20-minute walks a day is all they need, as they are built for speed, not stamina. They should be rehomed, not disposed of.

My first contact with greyhound racing was extremely distressing, and it has never left me. I was working as a psychologist in the NHS, and my colleague was married to a local vet. He was just starting in his career, and he was doing evening sessions at the greyhound track at Shawfield stadium in Glasgow. I believe it is a regulated stadium. At unregulated stadiums, veterinary cover may not be in place at all. My colleague frequently came into work upset, stating that there had been another dead dog in a bag in her garage that morning before she left for work. She described the terrible circumstances in which her husband worked in the evenings, where he was placed in a double-blind. He had to put down dogs that were injured or judged not to be good enough, otherwise they would be killed in inhumane ways—hit over the head with bricks, with their bodies discarded in the countryside and their ears cut off to prevent detection. They were left on motorways or in mass graves elsewhere. The dogs were simply treated as commodities by individuals whose sole goal was to make money at their expense. He often had to euthanise dogs that could have been treated medically and recovered; otherwise, in his words, they would simply have met a much worse fate. As a young vet, that must have truly depressed him, and it still upsets me to this day to think of it.

The second time I came into contact with greyhound welfare issues was slightly different. I was working in forensic mental health services. I often had to risk-assess violent offenders and provide recommendations for their management. I had to assess an offender who had been extremely violent towards his partner and children. He owned two greyhounds, and assessment revealed that he went hare coursing illegally with the dogs. As with many violent individuals, he had a history of violent attacks on animals, including his dogs. They were regularly kicked and beaten by a man, six foot tall, who used them to kill hares in the middle of the night. It was his favourite pastime, alongside violence towards humans.

Since that time, many of my colleagues and friends have rehomed greyhounds. They speak of the unspeakable lives that greyhounds live today, both within and outwith the industry. Some greyhounds are engaged in illegal hare coursing. Few prosecutions occur, so things have not got better. It makes me sick to the stomach to think of the suffering and distressing lives that thousands of greyhounds have today.

I would like to see change from the Minister. The industry needs radical reform. There should be one system of regulation covering all tracks. Local authority officers are not resourced properly or trained adequately to be able to assess tracks. They are not required to inspect tracks regularly, and that needs to be addressed. We need to address data on retiring greyhounds, the number of dogs euthanised unnecessarily and the accidents and injuries that occur at trackside. As we have heard, thousands of dogs go unaccounted for each year, and that simply is not good enough. There need to be regular inspections of breeders and training kennels, and not just tracks. We need to ensure the welfare of the dogs where they spend most of their lives.

The problem of doping needs to be addressed. Dogs are drugged to speed up or slow down their progress. That further undermines the integrity of greyhound racing and has serious effects on dog welfare. Mandatory testing should be required at tracks. Those found to be using drugs should face punishment including fines, bans, imprisonment or rehabilitation, or many of the above. We need to increase the number of dogs tested.

Ultimately, I do not wish to see self-regulation continue in the industry, as I feel it prolongs the time it takes for change. I have little faith in the industry regulating or reforming independently. The UK is already behind many international standards. Repeated attempts at reform have failed, so we need Government action now. There should be greyhound passports or tracking and a
moratorium on new tracks opening. Bookmakers should take responsibility and contribute to improvements in standards. The public simply will not stand for inaction in this realm. We must address the scourge of greyhound cruelty that permeates the UK.

3.37 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, in this important debate. I rise to speak as someone who has a forthcoming private Member’s Bill to increase the sentencing for animal cruelty, but it behoves all of us with an interest in the welfare of our animals to be here today to speak out and ensure that our system protects those who cannot speak for themselves about abuse and cruelty. That is especially important for animals involved in a working environment where the nature of the industry can put them under unusual pressure and strain.

Greyhound racing is a long-established leisure activity, but its success must be built on fair treatment, from cradle to grave, of the animals involved. There are real concerns about how far the Welfare of Racing Greyhounds Regulations 2010 have led to sufficient protections for racing greyhounds. DEFRA’s review into the success of the regulations does not adequately take those concerns into account. Self-regulation of the industry through the Greyhound Board of Great Britain is not open or accountable, and the GBGB has lost the confidence of many stakeholders and greyhound welfare organisations. It is not being sufficiently transparent to demonstrate that greyhound racing is a welfare-friendly activity.

One of the biggest issues is the lack of openly published data on the welfare of racing greyhounds. Baseline data on injury, euthanasia and homing after retirement from racing should be published by GBGB-licensed tracks and by independent tracks monitored by local authorities. Without those data, accurate comparisons simply cannot be made. Indeed, the RSPCA has called for greater transparency and the collection and publication of data throughout the life of every greyhound. In a submission to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, it said:

“The best way of doing this would be to adopt a joined up approach to track dogs, born in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, utilising one centralised database which could be used to capture information on racing status, injuries, drugs, retirement etc and could be used for rolling analysis and to identify patterns and allow remedial action to be taken for example should there be found to be an issue at a particular track.”

It could be argued that the Government are themselves encouraging the industry to be opaque by failing to ensure that the baseline statistics are published so that the industry’s performance can be evaluated. In 2007, the Associate Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare recommended that the industry should be required by law to publish annual statistics.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful for the opportunity to intervene, as my hon. Friend is making the same point that was raised by the Chair of the Select Committee, by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and by me—that the statistics for injured animals are very important. The Minister has a great track record—excuse the pun—on this matter. He was pushing the industry all the way down the line; he got them to make the agreement. With all due respect, in my view there has been a bit of slippage, in that the deadline is now 2017-18. The figures do exist. They ought to be available and hopefully, as a result of this debate and decisions elsewhere, they will be published.

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We cannot continue to just push this into the long grass. Action must be taken.

Ten years on, DEFRA’s position to simply encourage the regulator is clearly not working. In fact, the lack of data undermines DEFRA’s review of the success of the 2010 regulations, because full data are not publicly available. The Committee’s report of February 2016 stated:

“The absence of baseline data regarding issues such as injuries, euthanasia or rehoming makes it difficult to accurately assess the impact of the 2010 Regulations on key welfare issues.”

The Government acknowledged that difficulty in their response when they said, “the absence of such data has made assessing the effectiveness of the 2010 Regulations difficult”.

Another issue that goes unaddressed by DEFRA’s review is the two-tier system of welfare standards between GBGB tracks and those licensed by local authorities. The 2010 regulations do not establish a minimum set of welfare standards for all tracks and there are discrepancies in the way in which the Animal Welfare Act 2006 is applied and enforced at different tracks. On enforcement, greyhounds racing on self-regulated GBGB tracks are not protected under the Act. On tracks licensed by local authorities, there is no mandate for the local authority to adopt and enforce the Act, and most do not because of the financial cost of doing so and a lack of resources, which is even more of an issue in the current financial climate.

To give an example of the two-tier system, in 2011 an independent trainer was banned from keeping animals for life and received an 18-week suspended sentence for giving his dog Viagra and cannabis. In comparison, in 2014 a trainer licensed through GBGB gave his greyhound amphetamine, following two previous incidents of administering illegal drugs, and the disciplinary committee gave him only a six-month disqualification suspended for two years and a fine. That is a stark example of the absence of minimum welfare standards, which the 2010 regulations have done nothing to rectify.

In its submission to the Committee’s inquiry, the Association of Track Veterinarians, who are directly employed by the GBGB, stated:

“We are unanimously concerned that without appropriate changes, the current regulations will not improve greyhound welfare to acceptable standards, indeed even current welfare standards are likely to deteriorate with time.”

It is clear that there are significant issues with self-regulation in its current form. I am minded to support calls by various stakeholders—including the campaigning organisation Greyt Exploitations, which campaigns for a ban—for an independent regulator to ensure standards are adhered to and the process is publicly transparent. I would also urge the Government to compel, through legislation, the collection and publication of baseline data so that the industry is more transparent and welfare standards can be monitored. If the public’s concern for greyhound welfare continues to be ignored, that will only exacerbate the situation and escalate calls for a ban. We cannot allow poor treatment of racing greyhounds, or of animals in general, to go unaddressed.
Greyhound racing has been relatively common in the UK since the 1920s. In recent years there has been a sustained decline in the popularity of such racing, but it continues to draw substantial interest, to the extent that in 2014 it supported a £1.3 billion off-course turnover for bookmakers. It is big business.

Greyhound racing tracks operate within a hybrid or two-tier system. The majority of racing tracks—24 at the moment in England—are licensed by the Greyhound Board of Great Britain, which means they operate under GBGB’s rules of racing and are subject to inspections by the organisation. The standards that GBGB sets at tracks are independently accredited by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service and are supported at the tracks by the work of track veterinarians.

In England, there are also around five independent or “flapper” tracks that are not licensed by GBGB, but which are regulated and inspected by local authorities. Independent tracks have seen a notable decline in recent years. There were nine when the 2010 regulations were introduced and there are now just five. We found those tracks mostly cater for local hobbyist racing, as opposed to GBGB tracks, which are large-scale, commercially focused and often televised. Although different licensing arrangements exist, tracks under both systems must comply with the 2010 regulations. Askern Greyhound Stadium in Doncaster is one such flapper track, and it was visited by the Sub-Committee. I was pleasantly surprised by the care and attention that is given to animals at that independent track. I found that, in some respects, the standards of care and the attitude towards the animals were better than the standards at the Ladbrokes-owned GBGB track in Crayford, which we visited.

Greyhound racing issues that do not appear to have been fully addressed by the 2010 regulations. First, the regulations do not cover trainers’ kennels, where, as we have heard, racing greyhounds spend approximately 95% of their time. We found that a broad consensus agree that extending the regulations to include those kennels and incorporate them into the UKAS inspection regime is necessary.

Secondly, the fate of retired dogs that are unable to be rehomed at the end of their careers was unclear to us. For example, Dr Hazel Bentall told us:

“I have seen no evidence that the regulatory framework is consistent and moderated.”

The hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) rightly highlighted the absence and importance of baseline data on issues such as injuries, euthanasia and rehoming, which made it difficult to accurately assess the impact of the 2010 regulations on key welfare issues. Nevertheless, we identified two key questions relating to the effectiveness of the 2010 regulations. First, are adequate standards of greyhound welfare upheld under the current regulatory framework? Secondly, would a self-regulated industry see statutory guidelines as a minimum standard to be proactively built on, or is meeting the minimum requirement the full extent of its ambition?

We argue in our report that DEFRA must amend the 2010 regulations to require the publication of essential welfare data, utilising a database containing microchip data. We also argue that bookmakers profiting from greyhound racing have a responsibility to support…
greyhound welfare. Members of the Sub-Committee considered a statutory levy of 1% of gross turnover to be the most effective mechanism for achieving that. That recommendation addresses the finding that the existing, voluntary levy is ineffective and, as we heard earlier, not paid at all by Betfair, which is a major online betting exchange. Personally, I consider Betfair’s approach to be an abrogation of its responsibility to an industry that it profits from very significantly. I hope its customers and racing enthusiasts consider that abrogation when choosing where to take their custom in the future. We also argue that the 2010 regulations should extend beyond racetracks to cover standards at trainers’ kennels and include independent verification of those standards.

DEFRA’s response to the Select Committee’s report was published in June 2016. I was disappointed by the UK Government’s failure to support the sustainability of the industry. DEFRA noted its commitment to publishing statistics on injury and euthanasia, but did not require the GBGB to act until 2018. That point was well made by the hon. Member—my hon. Friend, perhaps—for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). It is deeply regrettable that the UK Government made no commitment to extend the regulations to cover trainers’ kennels. However, in September they published “Welfare of racing greyhounds: post implementation review”. That report is sadly an essay in procrastination. That, too, is regrettable.

The EFRA Committee’s report is a significant advance that highlights many of the greyhound racing industry’s failings. The UK Government’s response is not. I recognise the Minister’s personal interest in animal welfare, but the continued lack of commitment from the industry—particularly the large bookmaker-owned tracks—and the UK Government should shock the public.

3.54 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, and to hear of your particular interest in this serious subject.

I congratulate the Chair of the EFRA Committee, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), and all members of the Committee on their excellent and, I think we all agree, thorough report. I thank them for the detailed work they undertook to produce it, and for the time they spent visiting racetracks in London and Doncaster. The report sets out the concerns not just of the Committee but of animal charities, veterinary professionals and others who gave evidence that helped the Committee to reach its conclusions and make recommendations to the Government. I share the frustration of Members who have spoken today and the Committee. I am concerned that the Department’s response to date has not been more robust.

The sport of greyhound racing has declined in recent years. It has been enjoyed in this country for more than 90 years, and I hope it will continue to be part of our sporting life for many years to come, but only if the welfare of the animals that make the sport such a pleasure is a paramount concern for all those responsible for looking after their wellbeing.

The EFRA Committee’s report focused on the welfare of the 15,000 active racing greyhounds and the effectiveness of the existing regulatory framework. It looked at the broader welfare situation, and made a number of practical and achievable recommendations, to which DEFRA must give more detailed consideration in its review of the 2010 regulations.

The EFRA Committee report acknowledges that the 2010 regulations have led to some improvements, but it is concerning that the report also states that it is possible to make only a subjective judgment about the effectiveness of the regulations because of the lack of data on key welfare indicators. That was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) and others, including the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). The Committee is right to ask that the regulations be amended to require the publication of essential welfare data relating to injury, euthanasia and rehoming numbers. As vets have stated, epidemiological analysis could improve greyhound welfare, so that has to be taken into account. Rehoming charities have stated that the publication of data would allow them to make forecasts and plan their business, and owners and trainers believe it would reduce some of the criticism of the sport.

It is the aspects of the sport that the regulations do not cover that have proved to be of particular concern, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), the Chair of the Select Committee and others. As has been said so many times this afternoon, the fact that trainers’ kennels, where racing dogs spend 95% of their time, are not covered is of concern to all stakeholders. It is generally felt that kennels should be included in the UKAS inspection scheme. I hope the Minister will comment on that. There is also the fact that kennelling arrangements differ between the two systems that have been described today.

The independent tracks that come under local authority inspection do not have the same level of inspection as those that come within GBGB’s remit. It is particularly important to raise the issue of the responsibility that the Department is happy to place on local authorities, because this very morning the Government announced harsh cuts to local government funding, yet in their response to the Committee the Government encouraged the LAs to make full use of their investigatory powers under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. It is quite rich that we have had the announcement of harsh cuts today.

I agree with the EFRA Committee that the Department should consider encompassing the independent sector within the codes of practice being constructed with the Greyhound Board of Great Britain, in particular with regard to what alternative would be considered if self-regulation and transparency fail to improve welfare standards for racing dogs at tracks operated inside and outside the board’s system. Also, the Greyhound Forum has said that up to 3,700 dogs are unaccounted for each year. Statutory microchipping will go some way to highlight this issue, but compatibility between the GBGB and other pet databases is needed to accurately track the whole life of a racing greyhound.

Perhaps most important, as highlighted by the Chair of the Committee, is the area of finance, which needs to be addressed in legislation. The EFRA Committee welcomed the Government’s assurances that pressure has been brought to bear on the betting industry with regard to its voluntary contributions towards greyhound welfare. Are the Government sure, however, that the industry will respond to a call for greater welfare contributions
to avoid the imposition of a statutory levy? This has been said time and time again this afternoon. A levy seems much more preferable to waiting for a further voluntary response from the betting industry. After all, the voluntary scheme has seen a fall of 50% in the past decade. I hope that the Minister will respond positively to the Committee's call for a statutory levy—I am sorry to repeat that, but it is important to have one.

Overall, the Government appear to be paying lip service to the excellent recommendations made by the EFRA Committee. In the words of Paula Boyden, director of the Dogs Trust:

“The Government are not treating this issue with the severity it deserves—their proposed changes are minimal and lack the urgency needed to improve the industry. We have long campaigned and will continue to campaign tirelessly to ensure that these much needed changes to improve and regulate greyhound welfare are implemented.”

The evidence in the report gives the Government the opportunity to improve the welfare of racing greyhounds throughout their lives. I hope that the Minister will respond more fully today and will clarify for the Committee exactly when the outcomes of the review will be published.

4.2 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, in particular because I know you have knowledge of and interest in the subject of the debate. I welcome this debate and the interest that the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), and all the other members of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee have shown in prioritising this and other animal welfare issues for inquiry by their Committee.

I am also conscious that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) is something of an expert on the Welfare of Racing Greyhounds Regulations 2010, because I think he was the Minister when they were passed. The Committee clearly benefited from his experience. It is unusual for Ministers to be able to review their own regulations some years after introducing them. I am sure he enjoyed that experience.

As hon. Members might know, earlier this summer we had a rearrangement of portfolios in DEFRA. My noble Friend Lord Gardiner now takes responsibility for the issues we are discussing and will be taking them forward. However, I retain a passionate interest in the companion animal brief, and I am delighted to be able to represent it still in the House of Commons when we have debates such as this. I was also pleased to be involved in the early work of reviewing the regulations and, indeed, in giving evidence to the Select Committee.

The EFRA Committee report into greyhound welfare has made a significant contribution to our post-implementation review of the 2010 regulations. Before I come to the individual questions asked by hon. Members, it might be helpful if I briefly set out the areas in which the Government are in agreement with the Committee and what the Government said in our post-implementation review of the regulations, which was published in September, after our June response to the Committee.

For us, one of the EFRA Committee’s most important findings was that the introduction of the 2010 regulations appears to have improved the welfare of greyhounds at racetracks. That was one of the key objectives of the regulations when they were introduced. DEFRA’s own post-implementation review found that, when judged against their original objectives, the regulations have been broadly effective, especially in ensuring higher standards at independent tracks. I recall looking at the detail of that, and something as simple as ensuring a veterinary presence at all the tracks has clearly been instrumental in changing the culture. It is probably the single most important requirement of the regulations.

A key recommendation of the Select Committee report was that the industry self-regulatory body, the Greyhound Board of Great Britain, or GBGB, should be given a two-year probationary period to prove that it can be an open and transparent regulator of the sport “without legislative compulsion”. The Government fully agree with the Committee that GBGB could and should have done more since the introduction of the 2010 regulations to prove itself to be open and transparent. However—again, we are in agreement with the Committee—we have seen no evidence of significant failings on the part of the board to suggest that it cannot fulfil that role or that another independent regulator is required.

With regard to standards at the track, the board’s ability to self-regulate is legislated for by its continued accreditation for track standards by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service, or UKAS. UKAS provides independent, external oversight of GBGB’s performance as a regulator of standards at GBGB tracks. Should GBGB lose its UKAS accreditation, it will automatically lose its ability to self-regulate track standards, responsibility for which would then fall to a track’s local authority. One of the key findings of DEFRA’s review is that the system of enforcement of the standards in the greyhound regulations, taking account of the GBGB’s UKAS accreditation, appeared to be satisfactory in maintaining track standards. Indeed, we want to see that type of model replicated for the board’s enforcement of standards at trainers’ kennels, which has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members.

As part of DEFRA’s review, the board agreed to sponsor a British Standards Institution publically available specification for trainers’ kennels, which the board will adopt as the standard for its trainers’ kennels licensing scheme. The board will then seek to extend its UKAS accreditation to cover the kennel licensing work. I believe that proposal goes a long way towards addressing the concerns expressed by many hon. Members about standards at kennels away from tracks.

The Select Committee recommended that we extend the 2010 regulations to cover trainers’ kennels. Our review did not rule that out. The Government want to see how the greyhound board delivers on its commitments before we consider what further regulations might be needed. Given that we have an undertaking to introduce a new BSI standard for trainers’ kennels and to make that part of the UKAS accredited scheme—which the existing system predominantly is—it makes sense to see how that works before making any decision to regulate.

We have been clear that if necessary, we will regulate, because it is important to keep the board’s feet to the fire and to make it understand the stakes.
Jim Fitzpatrick: I am sorry if I missed this, but did the Minister say what the timescale was for introducing the new BSI standard?

George Eustice: We do not have a timescale, but I believe that the board is developing the standard now. We expect to see it developed, certainly during the course of 2018. Indeed, we have decided to delay the introduction of some of the small legislative requirements necessary until we have had an opportunity to review how the BSI standard is working.

The Government also want the board to deliver on the other commitments it has given to Ministers, which tie in closely with the Select Committee's recommendations and its proposed two-year probationary period. The board has agreed to begin publishing annually from 2018 figures for the number of dogs injured and euthanised at GBGB tracks and the number of dogs that leave GBGB racing, including an explanation of what “leave” means.

Neil Parish: I thank the Minister for going into so much detail about our report and how the Government are implementing quite a lot of what we recommended. I just question why it is necessary to wait until 2018 for those figures. Either GBGB has them or it does not. Why can it not bring them about now?

George Eustice: I will move on to that point, which my hon. Friend raised in his speech. I had that conversation with GBGB. The 2010 regulations required tracks to record those data as part of the local authority licensing regime and the UKAS regime run by GBGB, but those data were never actually collated centrally by GBGB. When I had that conversation with GBGB to secure its commitment to publish those anonymised data, it undertaking to begin collating them forthwith. That happened to be earlier this year, so a full set of annual data will be available at the end of 2017. That is what lies behind GBGB's commitment to publish the data from 2018, I reassure my hon. Friend. I pressed GBGB to see whether the data could be published earlier, but it explained that it had not yet collated them and they were simply recorded by individual tracks. I took that at face value, and I understand what the board says. If we can get those data published from 2018, that seems an important step forward and will probably achieve things far faster than any regulatory device might.

My hon. Friend also mentioned kennels away from tracks, which I have dealt with already. GBGB is planning to add that to the UKAS accreditation scheme and to developing a BSI standard for it.

My hon. Friend made the good suggestion that it is important that we recognise and give credit to gaming companies that contribute to the voluntary levy. As part of its annual report, the British Greyhound Racing Fund publishes a list of all the bookmakers that contribute to that fund. I do not have a copy of that report with me, but I am reliably informed that it already lists and gives credit to everyone who contributes to the fund. It is open to the industry to name and shame those who do not contribute. Indeed, the industry would probably gain some kudos if it were willing to do that, because I have not heard any Member here express sympathy with people who freeloade and do not pay their share. The industry and the racetracks may want to consider that.

Kerry McCarthy: In their response to the Committee’s report, the Government mention encouraging payment of the voluntary levy and naming and shaming, but would it not be a lot easier just to make that a statutory requirement so that everyone has to abide by the same rules and pay their way?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady makes a point that several hon. Members have raised. As she will be aware, this area of legislation is a matter for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. There is already a statutory horse-racing levy, which has issues of its own. To extend the remit in the way that she and others have suggested would require primary legislation—I do not think we could do that through secondary legislation—and I am told that there may also be EU state aid and competition law issues. Clearly, those types of obstacles will shortly be removed, and in that context the Government may want to revisit and reconsider the issue in the future. I simply say that it would not be as simple as she says to amend the legislation. I am sure that DCMS Ministers will look at this debate, since they are looking closely at these issues in the context of the horse-racing levy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton mentioned rehoming, which is a very important issue. There are estimates—these are only estimates—that around 8,000 greyhounds leave the industry, the sport, the tracks and racing each year. The Retired Greyhound Trust and other animal welfare charities do incredibly good work. The Retired Greyhound Trust rehomes between 3,500 and 4,000 dogs, and we think that other welfare groups rehome around 1,500 dogs. Some people say there are therefore between 1,000 and 1,500 missing dogs.

We have got the GBGB to commit to publishing clearer data about dogs that leave the sport, in terms of what happens to them and what leaving means. I think we all agree that we should aim at all costs to avoid the euthanasia of perfectly healthy dogs. Wherever possible, we should try to rehome these wonderful, kind, loving dogs. I met two of them when a constituent brought two greyhounds that had been involved in racing to see me.

The EFRA Committee’s report made it clear in paragraph 60, on page 16, that the “introduction of microchipping should significantly improve the tracking of greyhounds bred for racing from birth to death.” Let us hope we get some progress on that.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse raised the issues of trainers’ kennels, which I have dealt with, and of disappearing dogs, which I believe we can make some progress on. He referred to the £0.5 million welfare initiatives fund that we mentioned in our response to the Select Committee, which I understand was the result of better than expected fund income and an underspend. That is obviously a welcome boost at a time when, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton said, funds for this sort of work have generally been declining.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) highlighted some appalling cases of animal cruelty. I am as horrified by her examples and anecdotes as any other hon. Member or member of the public would be. I simply point out that every single case she cited is a clear breach of existing animal cruelty
laws. Those cases breach the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and would have breached animal welfare legislation predating the 2006 Act.

The hon. Lady also said that we should have a moratorium on the opening of new tracks. I am not sure that that is the challenge we face. We have some 28 tracks in total, 24 of which are under a scheme with the GBGB. Only four are regulated by local authorities, and they are small independent tracks. I am not sure that the challenge we have is dozens and dozens of new tracks opening up and causing new problems. This sport does not seem to be expanding; if anything, it might be losing popularity. I therefore do not believe that we need the type of moratorium she suggests.

The hon. Lady and several other hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), raised doping. That is already an offence under the Gambling Act 2005, and people can be prosecuted for it. Depending on what is used, it is also potentially an offence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow may take the view that there has been insufficient enforcement or that inadequate penalties have been applied in some cases, but the legal remedy for those issues exists.

Dr Cameron: I thank the Minister for clarifying those issues. Is there scope to put more resources into prosecution and ensuring that regulation goes much further?

George Eustice: There may be opportunities to review enforcement. Indeed, in DEFRA at the moment we have concluded another review of animal licensing establishments, where we are looking at getting more consistent enforcement across the piece on animal welfare. I am sure that I can look forward to another debate in the Chamber where the EFRA Committee is that we can look in great depth at what is happening, so we can visit the tracks. I congratulate the Minister on meeting the industry, seeing what is happening and drilling down on that.

First, the greyhound is bred. We then have to ensure that the greyhound is microchipped and that all microchipped greyhounds are registered. Once those greyhounds are registered, we will know what happens to those who have been used for racing when they finish their careers. That is essential. We have got the necessary components together and, as the Minister said, if GBGB can deliver that—it must be delivered by 2018—we will have the data, and then the Retired Greyhound Trust and other greyhound charities will be able to rehome these greyhounds so that they can have a good, decent life.

We also referred to kennelling not only at the tracks but at the trainers' premises, which is essential. When we went to the tracks, we found that they were reasonably well managed: there was veterinary supervision on the tracks and the greyhounds were inspected. It is what happens to them when they leave the track and when they are at the trainers' kennels—we must be certain that they are being well looked-after. A greyhound cannot be just a commodity that is used as a racing machine and then discarded at the end of its working life. It has to be looked after properly, and all those who can be rehomed must be rehomed. We must know where they all are. There cannot be a number who are euthanised.

From an animal welfare point of view, perhaps some—unfortunately, due to injury—may have to be euthanised, but euthanasia cannot be used as a way of discarding the dog at the end of its working life. Because they are brought in to do a job, they create a great deal of resource for the industry.

I cannot emphasise enough that the gaming industry must step up to the plate. Let us praise to the hilt those who are making a contribution to the retirement of greyhounds, but let us name and shame those who are not. If the betting industry in greyhound racing does not step up to the plate and make a contribution, I urge the Minister, as he said he would at the end of his speech, please to consider some form of legislation. In the meantime, let us name and shame. Let us shout that from the rooftops in this House and beyond, and let us hope that the press coverage we get covers this, which is one of the key points. People who are interested in greyhound racing and want to lay their bets on a race should, please, look at those bookies and see whether they are making that contribution to the retirement of greyhounds.
We can all work together across the parties. What showed today was that, whether we are Members from Scotland, from the Opposition or from whichever party, we all want to see better greyhound racing and better welfare for greyhounds, particularly retired greyhounds. I thank very much the charities who take on the work of rehoming all the greyhounds that it is possible to rehome.

This has been an excellent debate, and I thank the Minister again for his direct input into animal welfare. My final point is that the EFRA Committee must be a good training ground for both Ministers and shadow Ministers, because both the Minister and the shadow Minister were members of the Committee in the previous Parliament. May I wish everybody a very happy Christmas?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.


4.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 20 December 2016

[ROBERT FLELLO in the Chair]

UK Nationals Imprisoned Abroad

9.30 am

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the case of Andy Tsege and other UK nationals imprisoned abroad.

It is a pleasure to see so many hon. Members here today. I will try to limit my remarks to 20 minutes. I was informed yesterday that only three Members had put their names in to speak, so I do not know how many Members present intend to do so. Clearly, I welcome the opportunity for the debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for providing time for it.

During this festive period, hundreds of thousands of British citizens will be travelling home to their families or going on holiday for a break. People would expect such a trip to be uneventful. Why would anything go wrong? However, for some British citizens, what happened while they were travelling abroad has turned their lives upside down in a way that many of us could not begin to comprehend.

Two prominent examples of that are Andy Tsege and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Both are British—Nazanin is a dual national—and were arrested by foreign authorities and imprisoned without access to a fair trial. Andy was kidnapped by Ethiopian agents at Sana’a International airport in Yemen, with the Yemeni authorities stating that his detention had not occurred pursuant to any judicial process. Nazanin, whose two-year-old daughter was with her, was arrested while leaving Iran. The ordeal that both Andy and Nazanin have since faced is truly shocking, and on top of the injustice of their detention, their daily lives have been subjected to gross human rights violations.

In the time permitted, I will concentrate on the cases of Andy and Nazanin. A longer debate would of course have allowed the cases of prisoners of conscience of all nationalities, held around the world, to be raised, and many organisations have contacted me since this debate was allowed in order to draw attention to such cases. For instance, Ali al-Nimr is spending his 22nd birthday in prison in Saudi Arabia. His crimes were participating in a demonstration, “explaining how to give first aid to protestors” and using his BlackBerry to invite others to join him at the protest.

There is also the case of Nabeel Rajab, whose trial has been delayed for the fifth time and who is expected now to be sentenced on 28th December. That is perhaps a diversionary tactic because there may be less attention on his case as festive celebrations get under way. He is a Bahraini human rights activist and opposition leader. That case is of particular interest to the UK, because of the funding from the UK that is going into training and supporting the security and justice systems in Bahrain.

There is also the case, drawn to my attention just yesterday, of a dual UK-Lebanese citizen detained in Israel. The release of Mr Faiq Mahmoud Ahmed Sherari has been ordered by a military court in Israel, but as far as I am aware he has not been released.

I would also like to use this opportunity to raise the case of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. I know that many hon. Members here today have raised concerns about the pressures that that community are under in different countries around the world—perhaps most prominently in Pakistan, but also, I understand, in Algeria.

Today, however, I will concentrate on Andy and Nazanin. This will be the third Christmas that Andy has spent alone in a prison—he is now in a prison notorious for being Ethiopia’s gulag. He has not been able to speak to his partner and children in London for two years and has had no private access to British consular officials, leaving him unable to describe freely the treatment that he has received at the hands of his jailers.

Nazanin has been held, mostly in solitary confinement, for more than nine months. Her husband has campaigned tirelessly back in London for the UK Government to call for her release. It is still unclear whether the Government have done that. I hope that when the Minister responds, he will be able to clarify that. Have the Government actually called for her release? Her husband says that she has been at breaking point. She is currently allowed to see her daughter only for one hour each week in prison. Her daughter remains trapped in Iran, unable to see her father. Furthermore, representatives of both Andy and Nazanin have repeatedly raised serious concerns about their health.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. He raises the point about what our Government have done. In the case of Andy Tsege, I do not think it is in dispute that he was rendered unlawfully and was tried in absentia, and we would not recognise those processes. Does the right hon. Gentleman not think it extraordinary, therefore, that the Government have not even requested his release?

Tom Brake: I do indeed. What the Government are trying to initiate, which I will come on to shortly, is providing Andy Tsege with a lawyer, but as I understand it, he has no right of appeal in Ethiopia, and therefore providing him with a lawyer does not seem to be of great use.

The mistreatment of British citizens imprisoned abroad is unacceptable in all cases, regardless of what crime has been committed, yet in these cases the astounding truth is that it is clear that Andy and Nazanin are being held unlawfully. Attached to Andy’s name was a conviction which he was involved had conspired to commit acts of terrorism.

Nazanin was recently sentenced on charges that remain secret, despite her previous employment in Iran as an aid worker. The simple fact is that if these British citizens are not going to be charged with an offence
recognised internationally, they should be released immediately so that they can spend Christmas at home, safe with their families, who want nothing more than for them to be at home and for their lives to return to normality.

Yesterday, a representative of Reprieve and I met the Ethiopian ambassador about Andy’s case. We are grateful to His Excellency and the Minister responsible for public diplomacy for their time. We are aware that last Thursday—15 December—Andy received a consular visit. However, like all the other consular visits, that visit was supervised by the prison authorities. As I stated, Andy has never met consular officials in private. We understand that during the visit the UK ambassador told Andy that the UK may have found a lawyer to help him to “assess his options under the Ethiopian legal system.”

Unfortunately, that does not, in my view, demonstrate progress on his case. First, the UK Government’s approach to this case appears to ignore the fact that Andy is the victim of a series of crimes and is not a criminal. The UK Government’s failure to condemn the series of abuses that Andy has suffered and continues to suffer at the hands of the Ethiopian regime signals that foreign Governments can ignore international law and kidnap British citizens at will.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I declare an interest as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Ethiopia and Djibouti. The right hon. Gentleman has repeatedly referred to Mr Tsege’s “kidnapping”. Does he have any evidence that that was a kidnapping? Does he have any statements provided by the Yemeni Government to that effect? I ask because obviously that is not what the Ethiopians are saying. If the right hon. Gentleman does have such evidence, I am happy to help him with the case as far as that goes.

Tom Brake: My understanding is that the Yemenis have stated that the process of getting Mr Tsege from Yemen to Ethiopia did not follow a judicial process that they recognised. Furthermore, as the hon. Gentleman may be aware, the UK Government have repeatedly asked for a copy of the extradition treaty that apparently exists between Yemen and Ethiopia and, as far as I am aware, that has not been provided. I hope that that might provide sufficient evidence for him to want to investigate the matter further.

In addition, the UK Government’s strategy of focusing on access to a lawyer in this case is unworkable for a number of practical reasons. There is no legal conviction and sentence to appeal. Andy was convicted and sentenced to death illegally in 2009, while living in London with his family. The trial was described by a representative from the US embassy in Addis Ababa as “political retaliation” and “lacking in basic elements of due process”.

I maintain that Andy was abducted in 2014 amid a sweeping crackdown on opposition voices. There was no lawful basis for Andy’s rendition from Yemen to Ethiopia, and he has not been charged with any new offence.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that UK Governments—this Government and previous ones—have been too slow to criticise rendition, especially when rendition has been on the British Indian Ocean Territory?

Tom Brake: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady’s intervention. Rendition, and the UK’s involvement in it, is a black mark on our past. I hope that the UK Government will now fight it at every opportunity, including in this particular case.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I am slightly confused by this. Do the Yemeni Government accept that they knew that Andy was being removed from their territory, or do they say that it was done secretly without their knowledge?

Tom Brake: At the risk of repeating myself, the information I have is that the Yemeni authorities clearly know that he was taken from there but have stated that they believe that no judicial process was followed to extract him in that way. That would imply that if there was an extradition treaty in place between Yemen and Ethiopia, it was not actually used as a means of extracting him from that country. Perhaps when the Minister responds he will give us some more detail on what he believes the position to be.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way, and is laying out his case carefully and strongly. I congratulate him on securing this important debate. May I pursue this question? He has already stated that Mr Tsege may quite possibly have been the victim of a crime or of several crimes. If no judicial process was applied in the rendition from the airport in Yemen, does that imply that there could have been an official but non-judicial process? Could there have been some sort of official complicity among Yemeni authorities as well, in which case should we be aiming fire at their potentially having committed crimes against Mr Tsege?

Tom Brake: That is a very helpful intervention, and the hon. Gentleman has highlighted an area that requires pursuing. When we had the meeting with the Ethiopian ambassador yesterday, he implied that in the past there have been arrangements between the Yemenis and the Ethiopians and that perhaps those arrangements were used, as opposed to there being a formal extradition process. Yes, we might well want to question the involvement of the Yemeni authorities.

What is clear is that had the Ethiopian Government wanted to extradite Andy lawfully, they could have made a request for his extradition from the UK authorities—although I understand that there is currently no formal extradition agreement between the UK and Ethiopia. I believe that no such request was made and, as far as I am aware, the UK Government have been provided with no evidence of Andy’s so-called terrorist activities. I understand that the UK Government are apparently being encouraged to follow—this is the description from the Ethiopian ambassador—the open trial process that found Andy guilty in absentia as their means of obtaining information, rather than necessarily expecting it from the Ethiopian Government directly.
The Ethiopian Government have publicly confirmed, on a number of occasions, that there are no legal options open to Andy. Most recently, at the meeting yesterday, it was confirmed that he cannot appeal his sentence because he was absent from his trial. A plea for clemency to the Ethiopian President may be possible, and I look forward to some information that we were offered at that meeting about how such a plea could be initiated.

I maintain that access to a lawyer will not achieve justice for Andy. By continuing to pursue an unworkable strategy, the UK Government are not living up to their duty to protect British citizens facing the death penalty overseas. On that point, we got a degree of reassurance from the Ethiopian ambassador that Ethiopia does not apply capital punishment, although he did set out a couple of exceptions to that rule, so it was half reassuring and half not.

Andy’s most recent consular visit also highlighted continued failures by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in handling his case. For instance, although the FCO has continuously claimed, and represented to a UK court, that Andy could call his partner and children whenever he wanted to, the prison director informed the ambassador at the latest visit that “prisoners cannot make phone calls.”

That, too, was confirmed in the meeting with the Ethiopian ambassador yesterday. Thus Andy is not—and, as far as I am aware, never was—able to call his family, so his children face the third Christmas in a row without any contact with their father. He does not even have a pen and paper to write them a Christmas card. Given the fairly significant failures in this case and the way that it has been managed, I hope that the Minister will be willing to conduct a meaningful review of the Government’s approach, because I do not think that approach is delivering.

What more can be done to help Andy and Nazanin? Although hundreds of thousands of people have supported petitions and campaigns, in partnership with the tireless advocacy work of groups such as Reprieve and Amnesty International, ultimately it is the Ethiopian Government, the Iranian Government and our Government who have the most influence and leverage. To the Ethiopian authorities, I make a simple plea: let Andy make that call before Christmas. He has had two years without contact with his wife or children, and that can stop very easily if the Ethiopian authorities permit it.

To the Iranian authorities, pending Nazanin’s release, which I hope will be soon, I say: allow for visits for her young daughter involving extended contact, and in a suitable environment, taking account of the best interests of the child in line with the provisions of the convention on the rights of the child, which I am pleased that Iran has ratified. There is not time to raise the case of Kamal Foroughi in any detail, but I hope that other Members may refer to his case as well.

What should the UK Government do at this point? They need to call openly and loudly for Iran and Ethiopia to free Nazanin and Andy respectively. I believe that the weight of the Prime Minister calling for their release would be significant and set a strong tone that the UK does not stand by and let its citizens face appalling treatment, trapped in prisons, thousands of miles from their homes. We have seen the US and Canada—and the UK previously—secure the release of their citizens after publicly raising calls for the release of their nationals imprisoned unlawfully abroad. Yet the UK Government appear reluctant to do the same now.

The FCO stresses the work that it does for the families of Andy and Nazanin, and says that it repeatedly raises their cases with the respective Governments. However, all it appears to be doing is acquiescing in the dubious charges imposed on them by saying that it will not get involved in the legal system of another state, despite those legal systems being grossly, and so obviously, unfair. I am familiar with that argument—all too familiar with it—in relation to the constituency case of Neil Juaheer, whose parents believe was murdered by Brazilian police in a Brazilian police station.

If we were to get just one official public statement from our Prime Minister unequivocally calling for Andy’s and Nazanin’s release, and for the release of other British nationals imprisoned unlawfully abroad, that would convince the public that our Government will stand up for their citizens and would send a strong and unequivocal message to foreign Governments. My call is for the Prime Minister, the Government and the Minister to give Andy and Nazanin’s families some seasonal comfort over the next week—pick up the phone, issue a statement and call for their release.

9.49 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing this debate. As we have heard today, Mr Tsege, who was a prominent figure in Ethiopian opposition politics, has experienced terrible difficulties. He has undergone experiences that give many colleagues in this House cause for concern, which is evidenced by the number of Members of Parliament, from many different parties, who are in their places today.

I am here today because a member of my staff recently met Mr Tsege’s partner, Ms Hailemariam, at her request here in Parliament, was deeply moved by the family’s plight and referred Mr Tsege’s case to me. I pay tribute to Ms Hailemariam for her tenacity and perseverance in championing her partner’s case; as I said, that is why I am here today.

I will focus on one aspect of Mr Tsege’s case—that is, the apparent absence of the appropriate due judicial process. Judicial process under law is not apparent from his situation, and we in the UK Parliament should defend the right of all our fellow citizens, wherever they are in the world, to have the benefit of due process under law, whatever they might be suspected or accused of. We should not tolerate without challenge a UK citizen being subject to peremptory abduction, rendition, imprisonment and the lack of a fair trial, as appears to have happened in Andy Tsege’s case. That is why so many of us are here today.

Bob Stewart: I am so sorry to interrupt again. Is Andy now under sentence of death, having been tried in absentia, so he is there permanently? Is there any chance of a review of his case by the judicial authorities in Ethiopia? In other words, are we down to political, international and diplomatic pressure to get him out?
Fiona Bruce: As far as I understand it, in Ethiopia there is no right of appeal from a death sentence. I stand to correct if other hon. Members understand the situation differently, but I see some nodding in the Chamber.

I do not want to interrogate the veracity of the claims against Mr Tsege, but whatever the intricacies of his particular case, we cannot avoid the fact that a UK citizen has, by all accounts, been kidnapped, arrested, rendered and imprisoned, and then tried, convicted and sentenced to death in absentia, in flagrant contravention of the due process of law.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing the debate. Is it not material to this matter for the international community that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention described Mr Tsege’s detention as “illegal” and concluded that an “adequate remedy” would be to release him and afford him “adequate compensation”?

Fiona Bruce: That is right. As we have heard, Mr Tsege was convicted in absentia in 2009 while he was at home with his family in London. He was not formally notified of the proceedings brought against him, nor of his ultimate sentence. Obviously, he was not given any opportunity to defend himself and the US State Department has described his 2009 trial as an act of “political retaliation” that was “lacking in basic elements of due process”.

Mr Tsege was sentenced under Ethiopia’s Anti-Terrorism Proclamation of 2009—a statute that the Foreign Office has noted has been used to “restrict...opposition and dissent” by targeting “members of opposition groups, journalists” and “peaceful protesters.”

Mr Tsege was tried alongside scores of other political prisoners including his 82-year-old father. What is very concerning is that the anti-terrorism proclamation under which he was convicted was not introduced until a month after his in absentia trial began in June 2009. I know that many hon. Members share my concern about retrospective legislation, particularly in the case of criminal charges.

During the proceedings, the prosecution amended the charges against Mr Tsege, dropping the initial allegation that he was involved in plotting a coup d’état and introducing instead charges of conspiring to dismantle the constitutional order. I understand that UK authorities have noted that at no point have they been presented with any evidence against Mr Tsege from the Ethiopian authorities that would stand up in a British court, despite the requests made of the Ethiopian Government.

The civil liberties group, Reprieve, which I commend on highlighting the case, said that Mr Tsege was bound, hooded and bundled onto a plane headed for Ethiopia. It should be noted that the circumstances of his abduction, which have been widely publicised, have not been disputed by Ethiopian officials. The fact remains that the Ethiopian Government did not request his lawful extradition while he was living in London, nor have they produced any evidence to back up the claim of an extradition arrangement with Yemen. His kidnap at an overseas airport is a clear breach of the established international legal process.

Further, the UN special rapporteur on torture reported to the United Nations Human Rights Council that Ethiopia’s treatment of Mr Tsege has violated the convention against torture. In addition to the marked difference in Mr Tsege’s physical appearance before and after abduction in his television appearances—it is clearly discernible—a British psychiatrist commissioned by Reprieve, who has assessed his case, has noted his deteriorating mental state. I understand that Ethiopia has not allowed the British Government to have a private consular visit, making it impossible for Mr Tsege to report directly instances of suspected mistreatment.

There have been some consular visits, albeit not private. When Mr Tsege was with the UK ambassador to Ethiopia he stressed that he only ever advocated the conduct of politics “by peaceful means.” That echoes his testimony before the European Parliament in 2006 in which he encouraged Members of the European Parliament to back the “peaceful, just and fair struggle of the people of Ethiopia for freedom and democracy”.

In the years before his abduction, Mr Tsege mounted a global campaign to draw worldwide attention to concerns concerning developments in Ethiopia. He testified before the European Parliament and the United States Congress, encouraging the latter to introduce legislation to encourage Ethiopia to engage in “democratisation and economic liberalisation”.

Some organisations, such as the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which has investigated the case, have concluded that the only proper solution is for Mr Tsege to be immediately released and returned home. It could well be argued that the UK Government should demand that. If, following his release, the Ethiopian Government then wish to pursue a case against him, they should do so legitimately by seeking his extradition and observing the norms of legal process. What is the Minister’s response to that and what steps have the UK Government taken in that regard? Have they pushed for Mr Tsege’s release from Ethiopia, or have diplomatic efforts been limited, as has been reported, to efforts to try to convince the Ethiopian Government to grant him access to a lawyer, which, as we have heard, will be of limited benefit at this stage? Perhaps the UK Government are aware of information that is not in the public domain; what can the Minister tell us to help us to understand the otherwise inexplicable treatment of Mr Tsege?

In a recent letter to supporters of Andy Tsege, the Foreign Secretary wrote that “Britain does not interfere in the legal systems of other countries”, but it is interesting to note that in recent years, two UK citizens who were arbitrarily detained have been released: Lee Po in China and Karl Andree in Saudi Arabia. I understand that, in both cases, their release came about following intervention by the UK.

The question is whether we believe that the circumstances of Mr Tsege’s arrest and subsequent treatment are acceptable. Surely they are not.
Dr Mathias: Does my hon. Friend have concerns, as I do, that the UK Government may be giving aid worth millions of pounds to a country that is maltreating a UK citizen?

Fiona Bruce: I was going to observe later in my speech that I had the privilege of visiting Ethiopia as a member of the Select Committee on International Development in 2013 to look at UK aid projects there.

Mr Laurence Robertson: It is my understanding that no UK aid actually goes to Governments these days. Certainly, it does not go to the Ethiopian Government. I think that it goes much further down the line.

Fiona Bruce: It is now often the case that aid is not paid bilaterally to many countries. None the less, UK aid money is being spent in Ethiopia, as has been indicated by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias).

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): While the hon. Lady is on the subject of aid, I wonder whether she had an opportunity on her visit to look at the MSc in security sector management. I understand it was initially funded through a Department for International Development programme and it appears that some of the people who were responsible for Mr Tsege’s detention had taken part.

Robert Flello (in the Chair): Before the hon. Lady responds, I gently suggest that other Members wish to speak and that I will call the Front Benchers at half-past 10 o’clock.

Fiona Bruce: Thank you, Mr Flello. I did not have an opportunity to see the project to which the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) referred.

In conclusion, disrespect for basic human rights continues to be widespread throughout the globe. I see that all too frequently as chair of the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission. It is in that capacity, as well as in my capacity as a Member of Parliament, that I raise concerns about Mr Tsege today. As the Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, so eloquently stated:

“Upholding human rights is in the interest of all. Respect for human rights advances well-being for every individual, stability for every society, and harmony for our interconnected world.”

Robert Flello (in the Chair): There are now six Members who wish to speak. We have 29 and a bit minutes. I call Kerry McCarthy to demonstrate how succinct Members can be.

10.1 am

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Flello. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for this opportunity to discuss Andy Tsege’s case, which my speech will be focused on. Over the past year or so, I have been contacted by a lot of constituents who are concerned about the British Government’s apparent failure to support a British citizen with a partner and three children in London. I have met with Reprieve to talk about the case and I pay tribute to that organisation, not just for representing Andy, but for its work over many years in challenging the use of the death penalty across the world.

As we have heard—I will recap briefly—Mr Tsege was sentenced to death in absentia in 2009. He was at home in the UK at the time and had received no notification of the proceedings against him. He was convicted under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, legislation that was not even introduced until a month after his trial began, and there are reports that the prosecution frequently amended the charges against him. The trial was described by a representative from the US embassy in Addis Ababa as “political retaliation” and “lacking in basic elements of due process”.

As we have heard, rather than the Ethiopian Government approaching the UK to see whether Mr Tsege could be extradited, he was kidnapped at a Yemen airport, bound, hooded, and taken on a plane to Ethiopia in breach of international legal extradition processes. For a while, no one knew where he was being detained, but he eventually surfaced at a prison that has been described as “Ethiopia’s gulag”. His partner is not permitted to travel to Ethiopia and neither she, nor their three children, have spoken to him in two years. He has been shown on state television, where he apparently appeared exhausted and to have lost a lot of weight. The UN special rapporteur on torture has reported to the Human Rights Council that Mr Tsege’s treatment has violated the convention against torture, and a British psychiatrist has reported that his mental state is deteriorating.

While Mr Tsege has been detained, he has been allowed only brief and irregular visits from British consular officials, and none of those visits has been private. I understand that the most recent visit was last Thursday, in which he was told that a lawyer may have been found for him to assess his options under the Ethiopian legal system. I am sure that the Minister will tell us that this is a positive step forward, but it will be small comfort given that Mr Tsege was illegally convicted and sentenced to death, that there was no lawful basis for his rendition from Yemen to Ethiopia, and that the Ethiopian ambassador has confirmed to Reprieve and to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) that there is no right of appeal. Will the Minister explain what he believes legal representation for Mr Tsege would actually achieve and why the Foreign Office has not done much more to support him?

The Foreign Office, in seeking to explain its reluctance to help Mr Tsege, said that the UK does not intervene in other countries’ legal systems. Yet Reprieve points out that the UK has frequently requested and secured the release of British nationals who have been arbitrarily detained in other countries. It also points to President Obama’s successful request, before his visit to Ethiopia, for the release of bloggers sentenced to death under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation as evidence that the Ethiopian Government will respond positively to international pressure. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has also called for Mr Tsege’s immediate release.

I can understand why the UK would not wish, as a general rule, to intervene in other countries’ judicial systems, but surely that should apply only when we have confidence that the rule of law, due process and the independence of the judiciary from political interference—basic principles that should be at the heart of any legal system—are being upheld. Surely we have a responsibility to speak out where freedom of expression is under threat, and a duty to challenge torture and oppose the
[Kerry McCarthy]

dead death penalty in all circumstances. The Minister must see that Mr Tsege’s case highlights concerns on all those fronts, and he knows that there are wider concerns about Ethiopia’s human rights record. The Foreign Office has expressed concern that, in an attempt to restrict dissent:

“Those detained under the ATP include members of opposition groups, journalists, peaceful protesters, and others seeking to express their rights to freedom of assembly or expression”.

Amnesty International’s annual report highlights how members of opposition parties and protesters have been extra-judicially executed, and that the elections took place “against a backdrop of restrictions on civil society, the media and the political opposition, including excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators…and the harassment of election observers”.

It also reports that the ATP was used to “suppress freedom of expression” and detain journalists in the run-up to the election, and that many journalists have been forced to flee the country. Amnesty has condemned the recent arrest of the Ethiopian opposition leader as “an outrageous assault on the right to freedom of expression and should sound alarm bells for anyone with an interest in ending the deadly protests that have rocked Ethiopia over the past year.”

The Human Rights Watch report on Ethiopia also makes for disturbing reading, with evidence of “harassment, arbitrary arrest, and politically motivated prosecutions.”

It says that the media “remained under government stranglehold” and that security personnel have tortured political detainees. Human Rights Watch also describes Mr Tsege’s removal from Yemen as “unlawful”.

Even if the Foreign Office thought that Mr Tsege’s trial and detention complied with international law—a very big if, given what we have heard this morning—surely the Government would still have an obligation to challenge the death sentence given that the UK unequivocally opposes the death sentence in all circumstances. That used to be a human rights priority for the Foreign Office, but those priorities have now been abandoned in a shameful sign that the Government’s human rights work has been downgraded.

The Government chose not to renew their strategy for the abolition of the death penalty when it ran out last year. I would be grateful if the Minister would tell us why, and what the Government are doing to ensure that the international community does not interpret this as a weakening commitment to global abolition, because that is what it looks like. Will the Minister tell us whether FCO resources for challenging the death penalty have also been downgraded? The Minister will no doubt tell us that the Foreign Office has replaced its six human rights priorities with its three pillars. I would appreciate an update on how the Foreign Office is working to support those pillars overseas. I urge the Minister to consider the questions that Mr Tsege’s case raises about Ethiopia’s commitments to democratic values, the rule of law and the rules-based international system.

The UK’s support for human rights—domestically and internationally—should be robust and categorical. Too often, the issue appears to be an afterthought for Ministers when abroad and to be seen as a nuisance at home. I ask the Minister to reflect on what Mr Tsege and his family have been through over the last few years and to consider whether he deserves better from this Government. It is shameful and indefensible to treat a British citizen in this way. I hope we hear a firm commitment from the Minister to do absolutely everything he can, using the considerable leverage at the Government’s disposal, to secure justice and freedom for Mr Tsege.

10.9 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing it. The Library background information shows that he has done a lot of extremely good work for the gentleman in question.

As the human rights spokesperson for the Democratic Unionist party at Westminster, it is incumbent on me to raise the plight of a gentleman who has been the beneficiary of political asylum here in the UK since 1979. We are all aware of how the asylum system works and the fact that asylum is not easily granted. I recently dealt with a gentleman seeking asylum whose brother was murdered in Zimbabwe due to his political affiliation, and it has been a long battle to have the Home Office recognise his status. As we all know, Zimbabwe will shortly hold elections, but it is an authoritarian regime. I can but hope that true democracy will happen and the dictator, Mugabe, will be ousted so that my constituent and his family can return home to the country he loves and where he wants to be.

The fact that Andy was granted political asylum shows that he has a valid case. Our asylum rules state that, to stay in the UK as a refugee, a person must be unable to live safely in any part of their own country because they fear persecution, as Andy clearly does. Such persecution must be because of a person’s race, religion, nationality, political opinion—as in this case—or anything else that puts them at risk because of the social, cultural, religious or political situation in their country, such as their gender, gender identity or sexual orientation. A claimant must have failed to receive protection from authorities in their own country.

We are aware of many other cases across the world, and the right hon. Gentleman referred to some of them in his introduction. I asked a parliamentary question in July in which I asked the Minister to urge “the government of Iran to apply without discrimination Article 58 of the Islamic Penal Code to permit Kamal Foroughi’s early release.”

The Minister replied that “Mr Foroughi’s lawyers would be welcome to have contact with the Iranian Judicial authorities.”

Has the Foreign Office had any opportunity to assist Kamal Foroughi’s lawyers?

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has also been mentioned. Human rights abuses are rampant in Iran, and this lady has been abused and had her personal liberty taken from her. There have been petitions, and MPs, including me and many others in this room, have joined the campaign—we are all here to make the case.

Andy, who was born in Ethiopia, was granted asylum because he is a well-known and respected critic of the Ethiopian Government. In recent years he has appeared before the US Congress and the European Parliament’s sub-committee on human rights to speak about the current regime’s poor human rights record. Andy fled
Ethiopia in the 1970s after facing serious threats from the then Government because of his democratic political beliefs. His younger brother had already been murdered by Government security forces.

Andy’s safety in prison has been questioned, as have his cell and the people he is with. What has been done about that? We did not send him home, because we accepted that his life was at risk. His life is now at risk, and we have not secured his release and have perhaps not given the right help. Is that right? Surely we can and should apply diplomatic pressure to bring this British citizen, and father of British children, home to his family. The Foreign Secretary secured legal representation for Andy in June 2016, and he said:

“I have now received a commitment”.

What commitment did he receive, and what is he doing in relation to that commitment? It is important that we find out.

Since being kidnapped in June 2014, Andy has not been allowed access to his family, a lawyer or British consular officials throughout his ordeal. He has not been charged with any crime, and he has not been subjected to any legal process. In July 2014, Ethiopian state TV aired a heavily edited video of Andy apparently confessing to a number of offences. He appeared gaunt and disoriented, and he had noticeably lost weight. Screaming could be heard in the background. Torture is extremely widespread in Ethiopian prisons, and political detainees such as Andy are routinely abused to extract information and false confessions. Ethiopia is one of the world’s most repressive regimes. Christians are persecuted, stripped of their human rights, abused, tortured and reduced to second-class citizens in their own country.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) spoke about the aid that Ethiopia receives. Something is seriously wrong when a girl band—they are known as Ethiopia’s Spice Girls—received £5.2 million in aid, on top of the £4 million that they have already received, and where the recent elections in 2015 were held against a backdrop of reported political intimidation of opposition parties. Evidently, Ethiopia is a country fraught with problems, and it is concerning that Andy is currently languishing there.

Since his incarceration, the Ethiopian authorities have continued to peddle the myth that Andy is a terrorist and that his political party, Ginbot 7, is a terrorist organisation. Frankly, that could not be further from the truth and as his partner, Yemi Hailemariam, has said, he is a “politician, not a terrorist.” Ginbot 7, despite sustained pressure from the Ethiopian Government, has not been proscribed as a terrorist organisation by any other Government and, indeed, the UK is yet to be provided with any evidence of Andy’s supposed terrorist activity. It is appalling that Ethiopia is taking that line, and I truly hope that the UK Government have been vocal in rebuffing those claims to their counterparts.

I would be grateful if the Minister outlined whether the Ethiopian authorities have recently tried to provide any evidence against Andy and, if so, what the Government have said to the Ethiopian authorities in response. As per an answer provided by Baroness Anelay of St Johns on 1 December, Andy has now been visited by UK officials on 12 different occasions. That is in addition to the efforts of the Foreign Secretary and the UK ambassador, who regularly raise Andy’s case with the Ethiopian authorities.

Despite those prolonged and sustained efforts, Andy remains locked up in prison. The Government’s representations are welcome, but the Foreign Office must go further and call for Andy’s immediate and unconditional release. We keep hearing from the FCO that Andy has access to legal advice, but that simply does not go far enough. Reprieve has argued that any legal access is effectively pointless, as the Ethiopian Government have already said that there is no legal route by which Andy can be allowed to contest his death sentence.

The UK Government have repeatedly claimed:

“Britain does not interfere in the legal systems of other countries by challenging convictions.”

However, Reprieve categorically disputes that rebuttal. It is of the opinion that the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), personally intervened in the case of Karl Andree, who was released from a Saudi Arabian prison in 2015. As such, will the Minister clarify why it seems that the Government’s approach to Andy is different from their approach to Mr Andree?

Furthermore, what is the Minister’s position on the comments made by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) that, as Andy was kidnapped and sentenced to death in absentia, the Government should be calling for his release? Last Wednesday marked two years since Yemi and Andy’s children last held a conversation with their father—two full years in which he has had minimal contact with the outside world and has been stuck in a prison dubbed “Ethiopia’s gulag”. Andy now faces the prospect of another Christmas behind bars, without seeing or hearing from his beloved wife and three children.

In closing, I would like to draw a parallel with the situation of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Only last week, I met her husband Richard. After speaking with him, I
Robert Fello (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that I will call the Front-Bench speakers at 10.30 am.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): It is an honour to serve—in haste—under your chairmanship, Mr Fello. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing this important debate, which allows us to mention a number of cases. We have heard about the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. We need her release, but also, pending that, we need proper access for her family. The case of Kamal Foroughi, which was described strongly by the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Jack Dromey), is similar.

Like others, I will concentrate particularly on the case of Andy Tsege. I met his family initially after, as an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on human rights, I was made aware of his case by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who was also an officer and ensured that the group took up his constituent’s case, which he had been following. Obviously, since the right hon. Gentleman’s elevation to Leader of the Opposition, he is more constricted in what he can do and say in proceedings such as this, but I note his attendance for a large part of the debate, as I am sure he has Andy Tsege’s family.

Let us be clear: we are talking in this case about a series of instances in which someone has been treated appallingly. Andy Tsege was tried in absentia, which is a scandal in itself. He was then sentenced to death, which is also a scandal and should be cause for alarm given the UK’s diplomatic stance. He was then rendered in a gross way from a third country and imprisoned in Ethiopia, where he has been tortured and mistreated. Let us remember that the anti-terror proclamation under which he was sentenced was not introduced until a year that I know of. Perhaps he might want to reconsider.

I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is using somewhat appallingly. Andy Tsege was tried in absentia, which is a scandal in itself. He was then sentenced to death, which is also a scandal and should be cause for alarm given the UK’s diplomatic stance. He was then rendered in a gross way from a third country and imprisoned in Ethiopia, where he has been tortured and mistreated. Let us remember that the anti-terror proclamation under which he was sentenced was not introduced until a year that I know of. Perhaps he might want to reconsider.

I am certainly not taking sides with the Ethiopian Government on this issue, but I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is using somewhat appallingly. Andy Tsege was tried in absentia, which is a scandal in itself. He was then sentenced to death, which is also a scandal and should be cause for alarm given the UK’s diplomatic stance. He was then rendered in a gross way from a third country and imprisoned in Ethiopia, where he has been tortured and mistreated. Let us remember that the anti-terror proclamation under which he was sentenced was not introduced until a year that I know of. Perhaps he might want to reconsider. He is normally much more reasonable than that.

Mark Durkan: If the hon. Gentleman checks, he will see that I said that the Government are constantly referring to legal advice and legal assistance, in circumstances where there is no process. We have already heard that there is no right of appeal for Andy Tsege, and that he was tried in absentia. What I said was that the Government’s line about legal advice colludes with the fiction that there is a legal process with recognisable charges. I did not imply any other degree of complicity, and I did not actually use the word to which the hon. Gentleman refers. I know that he chairs the all-party parliamentary group on Ethiopia and Djibouti; it would have been interesting if he could have offered some alternative narrative from the Ethiopian authorities. As I understand it, the FCO has neither been given one nor referred to one, although the Minister might correct me on that when he replies.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing the debate and giving such a succinct summary of the case. It seems to me that the crime committed by Andy Tsege is being an outspoken critic of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front. I thought that we in this country encouraged that kind of behaviour, so I am not sure why, as the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) has just said, we are now accepting the Ethiopian version of events.

What is clear is that if the cornerstone of the British case is that Andy Tsege should be allowed access to legal representation, that has to mean more than just a list of lawyers that he may or may not still possess. The bottom line is that we would not expect any British citizen to get such poor support from the authorities. Will the Minister demand private access to Mr Tsege? Will he ensure proper legal representation? In fact, will he do what we would expect him to do for anybody and demand this man’s release?

Thinking back to the case of John McCarthy, what would have happened if we had all just sat back quietly and said nothing? Would McCarthy ever have been released? We must shout loudly and clearly that we are not putting up with that for Andy Tsege, or for Nazanin Ratcliffe. We expect our Government to protect our citizens, stand up for the rule of law and make it absolutely clear to regimes around the world that if they have no respect for human rights and the rule of law, they will get no favours from us.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I thank Reprieve for its outstanding research and advocacy on the case of Andy Tsege and many others in which I have been
involved. I say to the Minister, as have others, that the Government have intervened before. They intervened in the case of Karl Andree, and of my constituent Ghoncheh Ghavami, the young woman imprisoned in Iran for trying to go and see a volleyball game. She was released; her case was raised by the former Foreign Secretary with his Iranian counterpart. The former Prime Minister intervened in the case of Shaker Aamer, as did others.

I am delighted to see here the Leader of the Opposition, who is Andy Tsege’s MP, as well as the shadow Foreign Secretary. The Leader of the Opposition has worked on many such cases over the years. I went with him to Washington as part of the attempt to get Shaker Aamer released; the British Government were active in that case as well. The Minister himself has raised the case of the three young Saudis still on death row: Ali al-Nimr, Dawood al-Marhoon and Abdullah al-Zaher.

However, there are other cases in which the Government pull their punches, such as the case of Nabeel Rajab, the president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, who has been in and out of prison for five years, and is currently there on a charge of spreading false news by tweeting in a bid to discredit Bahrain. Believe me, that regime needs no help discrediting itself. There is often a suspicion that where our Government have trade or military links, they pull their punches on such matters. They are doing so in relation to Andy Tsege, who is a British citizen. Many of the people in the other cases that I have mentioned were not British citizens, or had dual citizenship. Undoubtedly we should intervene.

I know that time is extremely short. There appears to be no doubt—again, I am grateful for the briefing from Reprieve—that Andy Tsege’s case involves unlawful rendition. The Ethiopians do not appear to deny that; the Yemenis appear to accept it. That in itself should result in his release being immediately called for. There has been no due process. There is precedent for Government intervention, so I urge the Minister to give us some hope and confidence, particularly as we approach Christmas, that Andy Tsege can return home to spend time with his family in Britain.

10.29 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Fellar. A lot of the points have already been comprehensively made, so I will be as brief as I can in order to give the Minister and the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson the opportunity to respond. I join other Members in congratulating the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing this debate. The case has horrifying features. The legal system that I have seen in this country in many years practising at the Bar has many features that protect the human rights of individuals who face trial. Does the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) agree that Britain can have a real role in arguing for increased standards in human rights and representation at trial throughout the entire world?

Patrick Grady: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. I wholeheartedly agree with his point; I might touch on it towards the end of my remarks.

What other steps are the UK Government taking to monitor the wellbeing of their citizen, who is being held in what we have heard described as Ethiopia’s gulag? When will the next private consular visit be? When will he be allowed to speak to his family?

We have also heard about the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about in some detail. It is another dreadful situation, in which a British citizen was lifted at Tehran airport and, after an unfair trial, sentenced to five years. Again, there has been massive interest in her campaign from civil society and the public; I saw some of the campaigners making their way along Parliament Street a few weeks ago as I was on my way to the SNP offices at No. 53. I am proud to be among the Members of Parliament who signed a card to Nazanin, to let her know that she was being thought about, at the reception recently hosted by Amnesty International in Speaker’s House. The card is in the oldest and finest traditions of Amnesty. I remember being taken as a young boy to a talk about its work in support of prisoners of conscience and about the difference that a letter can make, whether it is to prisoners themselves, to the detaining authority or to our own Government. But we should not have to write such letters; as Members of Parliament we should be in receipt of them.

I believe that we are united today in this Chamber and across the House in calling out these unjust imprisonments and calling on the Government to do
more. The same is clearly true in the case of Kamal Foroughi. The SNP has welcomed the thawing of relations with Iran and the diplomatic progress that has been made, but how will the UK Government use that relationship to press for the release of these prisoners, or at the very least for consular access or third-party access from the likes of Amnesty and other human rights organisations?

The debate raises broader points for the UK Government. How can UK citizens denied their rights overseas be protected by any new human rights Act that the Government might bring in here in the UK? If UK citizens in such desperate circumstances cannot rely on the Government to defend their basic human rights, why should the rest of us at home have any confidence? The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) made a very important point about rendition, and particularly the use of the British Indian Ocean Territory. The Government have to be clear about whether that territory has been used for rendition and on what occasions, and while they are at it they should consider the resettlement of the Chagos islanders—an issue that I know the Leader of the Opposition is also exercised about.

The point about the UK’s position on the death penalty was well made by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy); as is often the case, I agreed with almost everything she said, so there is not much need to repeat it. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and other Members all gave examples of cases in which the UK Government have interfered in or made comments about judicial systems in other countries. The key point in these cases is that there is no evidence that the judicial systems in question are meeting any international standards; these people have been illegally or unlawfully detained, so there is no judicial process for the Government to interfere with.

The UK Government have a duty to lead and to give confidence to all their citizens, here and overseas, that they respect human rights and the rule of law. This is the festive season; one of the great Biblical injunctions is “to proclaim good news to the poor…liberty to captives”, so let us hope that the Government will live up to the spirit of the season and call today for these prisoners to be set free.

10.35 am

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Flello. I thank the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) for securing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. This matter is long overdue to be addressed by the House.

Some powerful speeches have been made today. I thank the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), for Foyle (Mark Durkan), and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), and my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for contributing to the debate. A running theme has been the fact that the Government have intervened in other cases, with the case of Karl Andree being a prominent example. The hon. Member for Foyle made a powerful speech expressing his frustration, which I think many of us feel, that his criticisms should be borne in mind. Many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak, highlighted the perceived poor support for these prisoners from the Government and the failure to demand their release.

On the day the Foreign Secretary was appointed, he stated that even when British nationals depart our shores, their rights as British nationals travel with them—that “when you leave Heathrow, when you leave Dover, a British citizen is basically the responsibility of the Foreign Office”.

Unfortunately, as this debate has highlighted, those words ring hollow in the cases of Andy Tsege; of many other British nationals who are being detained abroad, such as Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Kamal Foroughi, who are both being held in Iranian detention facilities; of Ali al-Nimr, who is being held in Saudi Arabia; of Nabeel Rajab, a Bahraini human rights activist; and of many others who have been mentioned today.

We are concentrating on the case of Andy Tsege. As we have already heard, he was sentenced in absentia under Ethiopia’s anti-terrorism proclamation of 2009, while living here in London. That legislation has been described as a way to “restrict…opposition and dissent” by targeting “members of opposition groups, journalists, peaceful protesters”—those are the words of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

It is worth noting that Mr Tsege’s case differs from many other UK consular cases, but that was not mentioned in a letter written by the Foreign Secretary on the matter on 14 December. Mr Tsege became a victim of extraordinary rendition in June 2014. He was apprehended by Ethiopian forces while travelling through an international airport in Yemen and taken illegally to a prison in Ethiopia to be charged and sentenced to death without a fair and free trial and without legal representation. My first question to the Minister is whether he will clarify why that point was not made in the 14 December letter.

The Ethiopian Foreign Minister has told UK officials that Mr Tsege is not permitted to appeal against his death sentence. After promising the previous Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), that Mr Tsege would be allowed to see a lawyer, the Ethiopian Government have failed to deliver on that pledge. He has only just received a list of lawyers allowed to represent him, but has been given no way of contacting them. I hope for more information and clarity on that from the Minister today.

Andy Tsege’s whereabouts remained unknown for two weeks after he was taken. He was then kept in solitary confinement for 12 months. The UN special rapporteur on torture has reported to the UN Human Rights Council that Ethiopia’s treatment of Mr Tsege has violated the convention against torture. UK consular staff in Ethiopia have yet to visit him privately since he was imprisoned. Rumours of human rights abuses have emerged, and he recently reported that he feared for his life. Will the Minister provide an update on progress, Mr Tsege’s health, and the possibility of future visits?
The shadow Foreign Office team have been working hard to press the Government into action to secure Mr Tsege’s release and to raise awareness of the case at the respective agencies. My predecessors and I have regularly written to, met and spoken to the Foreign Secretary and Ministers to urge the Government to speak out on this issue, but so far they have refused to demand his release. The shadow Foreign Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), and the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), have on two occasions held meetings with the Ethiopian ambassador and the Ethiopian representatives at the UN Human Rights Council. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition—Andy Tsege is a constituent of his—has had a request to visit him refused. My hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary represents Yemi and Andy’s family, who live in her Islington South and Finsbury constituency, and she has worked tirelessly to raise the profile of this case, which I am very pleased has been brought to the House’s attention today.

While the release of Andy Tsege, and that of the other UK nationals in the cases highlighted, is being negotiated, what interim action will the Minister take to ensure that such prisoners are treated fairly and humanely? We fully understand and respect that we should not wish to interfere in other countries’ legal systems and determinations, but Mr Tsege has been given no legal due process, nor has any evidence been produced of the crimes that he has allegedly committed. The legality of his extradition is also questionable. A British national has been illegally detained through the means of extraordinary rendition and has suffered human rights abuses. I press the Minister to use his influence and uphold our responsibility to secure Andy’s release and return him home to our shores.

I pay tribute to the families who have endured the forced removal of their loved ones, often without knowing where they are, how they are being treated and even whether they are still alive. I, too, attended Amnesty International’s Human Rights Day event, which the hon. Member for Glasgow North mentioned. I agree with him that we need to do more than write letters, as much as we know that such gestures are appreciated.

Andy Tsege’s partner Yemi has campaigned endlessly for the past two and a half years to try to bring her partner home to their three children. She has had one solitary phone call from Andy since he was apprehended. She has said:

“The saddest part in this ordeal is how Andy’s case has been handled by this government. It is surely the bare minimum for a British national to expect that his government will protect him and stand up for his human rights.”

She finished by saying:

“I am beginning to lose faith with what it means to be a British citizen. Not just for Andy, who has been abandoned by his Government, but also for me and my children, who were born and raised here. I fully appreciate the boundless complexities, but there is one very simple fact that every day that goes by we all lose the most precious of things which is time to be a family, and for Andy to be a father to our three children. I hope the government realises just how much we have sacrificed.”

I thank Yemi for her words, and all Members present will feel a sense of empathy with the sadness she has expressed. I hope that no one in Westminster will ever have to experience for themselves what such sacrifice truly entails. Will the Minister commit to securing Andy’s release as soon as possible? We have heard the heartache of the families left behind; how long is the Minister prepared to let that endure?

10.44 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is an honour to respond to this important debate, Mr Ffledllo. I welcome all the contributions that have been made.

The debate is important because it has allowed Members of Parliament to express their concerns on behalf of constituents and the families of those affected by consular issues. It is important for Members to be able to raise these matters, but also for the Government to explain in more detail what we can do and are doing, as well as touch on the fact that many things are happening behind the scenes that we cannot share.

As many colleagues have outlined, the contact that Britons experiencing difficulties abroad have with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office may be the only time they have a relationship with the FCO, or indeed the Government as such. They want that support, and they want us to get it right and help them. In any typical year, we deal with more than 310,000 calls for assistance, and around 17,000 cases are running. That shows the scale of what Her Majesty’s Government are doing through our posts, embassies and high commissions around the world, as well as in the Foreign Office, of course. I shall spell out consular policy in general terms and the policy on the detention of Britons by other states, and I will look at the two big cases—the Tsege and Ratcliffe cases—in a little more detail. I do, though, recognise that there are many other cases that MPs may want to raise separately outside this debate.

I do not say this defensively, but simply to try to put things in perspective: I ask for a more cautionary tone from some Members. There has been talk of the FCO doing little, not caring, or not being committed, and I take a bit of offence to that, personally. I understand that that sort of thing is sometimes said because these are passionate issues, and MPs want to be seen to be doing all they can to help the family concerned, but I fully reject the idea that the Foreign Office or Her Majesty’s Government are not absolutely committed to helping every single Briton as best we can, often in very difficult circumstances, and to ensuring that justice is done, and that they can return to the UK as quickly as possible.

I shall not dwell on this, because that would not be appropriate, but my approach is shaped by my personal experience dealing with a very difficult consular case involving the killing of my brother in the 2002 Bali bombing. I think of that every time any family member comes to me and says that somebody is missing, hurt or needs to be brought home. I make sure that I and the team I am working with are able to do everything we can, but I ask Members to understand that a phenomenal amount of activity happens behind the scenes that we deliberately cannot talk about. In fact, talking about it openly could affect the agenda and how things are being interpreted in the relevant country, where they will read the headlines about us shouting from afar, as some Members have said. I know of cases that have been delayed by an unhelpful headline, because the country has taken offence at what they have read in the British press as it is reported back.
Liz McInnes: I appreciate what the Minister is saying, but he has heard the words of Andy Tsege’s family, who have been left behind. I understand the need to keep some things confidential, but surely the family should not be feeling the way that they are; the Minister heard their words expressed very clearly.

Mr Ellwood: I understand what the hon. Lady is saying, and I shall address that specific case, but I should be clear that, in some cases, we are subject to the wishes of what the family want to do. I make an effort to meet the families, either with MPs, by myself or through our consular staff, and they themselves sometimes do not want things being made public—and sometimes I do not have permission to say what I am doing. Many cases have been brought up, particularly the two that we are focusing on, but I do not have permission to share in public what is going on, or to decide what can be said, because that is in the gift of that family, and we must respect their wishes. I ask Members to recognise that as well.

In these cases, we are often dealing with countries where governance, the rule of law and transparency are not at the levels that we in this country enjoy, defend or promote. We did not always have that right in the 800 years of our history; it took us a long time to get where we are today. Many countries are on that learning curve. It is absolutely right that our international development money goes towards helping to improve their justice systems, so that they have better, more transparent processes for dealing with such cases. That is the reality check—the prism through which we must look at these cases—but it should not deter us from ensuring that we work as hard as possible right across the piece to help Britons abroad.

As I say, consular assistance is at the heart of what we do in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Our consular staff give advice and practical support to British nationals overseas when things go wrong. That support, I stress, is not a right or an obligation. We do not have a legal duty of care to British nationals abroad, but this Government are proud, as I think successive Governments have been, of the long-standing tradition of offering British nationals the best consular service in the world.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not, because I am running out of time. If there is time at the end, I will. Independent customer feedback is overwhelmingly positive and shows that our staff approach their work with care, empathy and professionalism. As I have indicated, the volume, variety and complexity of cases are staggering. In the last financial year alone, our staff overseas dealt with more than 5,000 detentions, 3,600 deaths and nearly 4,000 hospital cases. We increasingly focus our precious resources on those who need it most: the vulnerable. Some things we do not and will not do, as has been implied by hon. Members today: we do not take decisions for people; we do not interfere in another country’s legal or judicial system, although as I said, we try to advance their systems through our other programmes; and we do not seek to get for British people a better deal than the locals get.

It is important that we use consistent criteria in determining how much support we provide in each case. Our job is to ensure that the public pressure in certain cases does not unfairly divert our attention from the large number of cases that never hit the media. While serious cases have been raised today, 13 British nationals face the death penalty throughout the world. There are more than 2,000 British nationals in detention at any one time, the greatest number of whom, about 400, are in the United States.

We have a clear process for engaging with detention cases. Host Governments notify us when a British national is detained, as long as that person agrees. We then make contact or visit the individual, where possible within 24 hours. Our priority is always their welfare—ensuring that they are receiving food, water and medical treatment, and that they have access to legal advice. In the majority of countries, our staff visit people in detention about four times a year. Some prisoners have described our visits as a lifeline; in some cases, they might be the only ones they receive.

Our assistance does not stop there. If British nationals tell us that they have been mistreated or tortured, with their permission, consular staff express our concerns to the authorities and seek an investigation. Where we cannot provide support, we work through others, such as the charity Prisoners Abroad, and they support detainees and their families and help to provide and maintain contact. If there is no family, Prisoners Abroad can help find people a pen pal or send them books to read or study. It can also help with prisoners’ resettlement in the UK after release.

The death penalty was raised by a number of hon. Members. Irrespective of the charges against any British nationals, we do all we can to ensure that the death penalty is not carried out. Indeed, yesterday, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution in favour of a moratorium on the use of the death penalty. We continue to press countries to advance their systems so as to remove the death penalty, as we did in ours.

I turn to the two main cases that have been mentioned; if there is time, I will progress to others. If I do not get a chance to respond now, I will write to hon. Members on the details of the questions they have asked, as I have done after other debates.

Mr Tsege’s case is well known to me, senior colleagues in the Foreign Office and Members in the Chamber. We are committed to offering the best consular support to him and his family. Since he was arrested and taken to Ethiopia in June 2014, we have worked hard to ensure his welfare, and his access to consular and legal advice. We continue to do so. We take every opportunity to raise his case at the very highest levels in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Government, whose own difficulties have been touched on today, are in no doubt about our concern for Mr Tsege and the priority that we place on ensuring his wellbeing. The Foreign Secretary and his predecessor have both raised Mr Tsege’s case personally with the Ethiopian Government, and our ambassador takes every opportunity to do so. I will visit the country at the end of January, and I will ensure that the mood and tone of this debate, and our important stress on the case of Mr Tsege, is related to the Government.

As a result of our continued high-level engagement, we have ensured that Mr Tsege is no longer in solitary confinement, and we have received a commitment from
the highest levels of the Ethiopian Government that he will be given access to a lawyer. Last Thursday, our ambassador visited Mr Tsege, who appeared to be in good health and good spirits, and she was reassured about his welfare. Mention has been made of a private meeting not being allowed to take place, but the standard rules in Ethiopia are that all visits are accompanied. Those rules are followed by Ethiopians themselves.

I understand why some people have called for the UK Government to advocate Mr Tsege’s release, but we believe that calling for his release would not meet with success; just by shouting out, we would not win his release at this stage. Indeed, to do so could put at risk the progress made so far, including on our access to Mr Tsege. Furthermore, as I said at the start, we cannot interfere in the legal systems of other countries. We have, however, lobbied the Ethiopian Government strongly and consistently against the application and use of the death penalty. They can be in no doubt about our position.

On the case of Mrs Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, as hon. Members are aware, Iran does not recognise dual nationality—that is not the case in the UK; we consider Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe to be a British national—and has repeatedly refused permission for visits to her. We have repeatedly requested the Iranian authorities to grant us consular access so that we may be assured of her welfare. The Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and I have raised the matter at our respective levels. I also raised it with the Iranian ambassador only a couple of weeks ago, and I have met Richard Ratcliffe, the husband.

Since we were first made aware of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s arrest, we have been supporting her family. I have met the family on three occasions to reassure them that we will continue to press the Iranians for greater consular access. We also stand ready to assist, if requested, with the return to the UK of her daughter, who is not, as has been said in the debate, trapped in Iran. The daughter is allowed to return to the UK at any moment; it is a family decision for her to remain in Iran.

I am obliged to give the final minutes to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who introduced the debate. In conclusion, therefore, I simply say to all hon. Members that we take the issue of those detained overseas very seriously. I pay tribute to the families and loved ones during distressing times, and I thank consular officers who work every day to support British nationals in their most difficult times. I also thank Members of Parliament for the role that they play in bringing aspects of different cases to the fore and in lobbying me personally. I stand ready at any time to meet them, even away from the Foreign Office.

Supporting British nationals in difficulty abroad is an absolute priority for me and for us at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. We cannot always do as much as families want, but I assure the House that we do everything we can, and we will continue to work tirelessly to protect British nationals’ welfare and to uphold their rights.

10.58 am

Tom Brake: I thank all hon. Members who have spoken, and the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), for making time to attend the debate. The Minister has heard the consistent and very strong message from all Members today that Andy and Nazanin’s detentions are unacceptable and illegal, and that their trials have been frankly deplorable. He is also getting a consistent and identical message from their families. If I have concern about what he has said, it is that he is hiding behind family confidentiality. He must respect that, of course, but families are asking him to take the action that has been set out in this debate. We must have public, outspoken action now at the highest level, from our Prime Minister, to secure their release. We demand—

Mr Ellwood: I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman’s peroration, but what he said is incorrect. I am following the advice of families very carefully indeed. I would say more if families allowed me to, and I think he disingenuously has misled the Chamber by making that suggestion.

Tom Brake: It is clearly very important for the Minister to sit down with the families. Having observed some of the body language of the families—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
CrossCountry Trains: Gloucester

11 am

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered CrossCountry intercity train services to Gloucester.

Mr Fiello, it is a great pleasure to hold the last Westminster Hall debate of 2016 under your chairmanship. Although the subject—the thorny issue of CrossCountry trains to Gloucester—is narrow, many wider issues of growth, regeneration, connectivity and, ultimately, responsibility are at stake today.

I will start with the wider issues. Small cathedral cities such as Gloucester are among Britain’s greatest jewels. We have an abundance of natural, architectural and human heritage. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s developers and planners alike took a cavalier and unimaginative view of heritage, today, much boosted by a greater understanding of the modern uses of old buildings, and by the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, we realise that heritage, alongside modern retail attractions, is a driver of tourism and economic growth. Gloucester’s visitor economy grew by 8% last year, the fastest growth in the county of Gloucestershire and among the fastest in the country.

Gloucester has modern industries, including cyber, the reinvigorated nuclear power industry with the operational headquarters of EDF Energy, and sophisticated engineering, particularly aerospace and automobile. Also, the future of tidal lagoon power will potentially be headquartered in the city. But like other small cities, our ratio of private to public sector jobs is low—Gloucester ranks 56th out of 62 cities in Centre for Cities research—and we have one of the lowest rates of private sector job growth. Under the Governments since 2010, several public services have—understandably, given the pressures on public finance—been consolidated into regional hubs. The Courts and Tribunals Service, Her Majesty’s prisons and, most recently, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs are three examples. All the workers from Gloucester at those employers, as well as at Royal Mail some time earlier, have been offered jobs in Bristol. With the regionalisation trend and the growth of, and emphasis given to, big cities, Bristol has inevitably been the main beneficiary of the relocation of public sector jobs around the country. In both those cases—of tourism, because of Gloucester’s great heritage and the new retail attractions, particularly in Gloucester Quays, and of public sector employees whose jobs have been relocated to Bristol trying to get to work—there is a huge demand for the connectivity that good rail services provide.

Gloucester railway station is, in many ways, remarkable. It has the longest platform in the country, and it is right in the city centre, the advantages of which anyone who lives or works in a city knows. But it struggles with two competing facts. To enter the station trains have to come off the main line from Birmingham to Bristol and through the railway triangle and, from a train operator’s point of view, that takes extra time and causes services between those two cities to take longer.

In 2006, the then Gloucester Heritage Urban Regeneration Company—snappily named GHURC—closely considered what might be done to create an alternative station “on the main line” next to and parallel with Eastern Avenue, which is the main road entrance to the city. The GHURC carried out an extensive review and had many meetings with the landowner Network Rail and the train operators, and its chief executive, Chris Oldershaw, summarised why he believed a new railway station would not be possible:

“Extensive discussions between the GHURC, landowner Network Rail and the train operators were held last year to scope the building of a new railway station on the railway triangle. The train operators did not support this course of action and Network Rail finally ruled this out as unviable. Network Rail has said that the future of Gloucester central station is not in doubt and confirmed its intention to retain the station and invest in improvements over the next three years.”

In those talks, no one on the GHURC board, which included the then Bishop of Gloucester; my predecessor as MP for Gloucester, for quite a lot of the time; councillors from all parties; leading businessmen; and people from the voluntary sector, demurred from the decision that was made. Indeed, no other decision could have been made, given that no one—those who were to operate the trains, those who owned the land or those who were responsible for the rail services—wanted a new station and the Government of the day did not wish to provide any money. However—this is the crucial point that the Department for Transport must grasp—the corollary to that decision is the need to recognise that trains have to come off the main line to get into Gloucester station and then go out on to it again.

The situation is different for services to Wales, because Gloucester is on the way to Wales for trains from Bristol and from Birmingham and Cheltenham. That is a different issue, and I should make it clear that CrossCountry runs a good service to Wales and that all those trains pass through Gloucester. That is not the issue. The issue is the inter-city trains, many of which call at a huge number of stations. The longest such service, I think, the Aberdeen to Penzance route, which goes through the cities—I re-emphasise “the cities”—of Britain. However, only three of the 63 inter-city services between Birmingham and Bristol stop at the city of Gloucester.

My crucial point today is that if the capital city of Gloucestershire is not allowed to have a new station on the main line, as was decided some years ago, before both the Minister’s time here and mine, we must accept that trains have to stop at the city of Gloucester, coming off the main line route and up the railway triangle. That is the core issue at stake with CrossCountry today. Great Western Railway long ago accepted that, and every service on its London to Cheltenham route comes into Gloucester. That will continue to be the case when the operator expands its services, with more direct trains to London in 2017, and more trains to Swindon thanks to the redoubling of the Swindon to Kemble line by the coalition Government, about which people across the county of Gloucestershire are pleased.

Why, therefore, does CrossCountry find it so difficult to stop at Gloucester? I believe that there are two key reasons. The ostensible reason is that the additional time the stop would take would mean that passengers travelling from Birmingham and Bristol would be delayed and might be tempted to travel by car instead. Anecdotally, I understand from people who work in the rail industry that, interestingly, when the services to Gloucester were taken out, mostly between 2003 and 2006 under the
Virgin franchise, the amount of time scheduled for those trains to get from Birmingham to Bristol was scarcely altered.

The Department for Transport will be able to look into that in detail, but I was emailed this morning by someone who looked at the train schedule for a CrossCountry service yesterday on the Aberdeen to Penzance line. The train that was highlighted to me arrived a few minutes late at Cheltenham and left nine minutes late, but arrived at Bristol Temple Meads absolutely on time. I gently put it to the Minister—the Department will be able to do its research—that it looks to me as though the time scheduled for the Gloucester stops was not taken out of the schedule when the Gloucester stops were taken out. Effectively, it acts as a buffer for creeping delays on the service as it comes from north to south. The avoidance of Gloucester enables the operator to ensure that by the time the trains arrive at Bristol, they are on time. If that is the case, that would be a shocking example of how train operators are treating the city of Gloucester. Even if that is not the case, the operators’ approach to Gloucester is revealing.

On Radio Gloucestershire this morning, I was asked a series of questions by the journalist, who was effectively reading from a script provided by CrossCountry. They asked, “Why is it not acceptable just to go to Cheltenham and change there?” Imagine, Mr Flello, that you are travelling south-east from a certain point. What logic is there in getting on a train that goes west, in order to catch another train that then brings you back past the station from which you started half an hour earlier, as a means of getting to your destination to the south-east? That is the most extraordinary concept. If we did that everywhere, we could reschedule all our train services around the country, taking out a whole number of stops, closing down various stations and inviting people to travel in the opposite direction in order to go back through where they started from.

The journalist also asked, “If the trains stopped at Gloucester, what about other passengers from other cities trying to get to their destination as fast as possible?” Well, what indeed? But hang on—if we started taking that approach, we would start ruling out a whole series of cities so that we could cherry-pick which passengers from which cities we wanted to arrive at their destination fastest. There has to be equality of treatment for all cities on an inter-city service. That is my fundamental starting point.

To be fair, the Government have been extremely helpful on the wider issue of growth and regeneration. I referred to that at the beginning of the debate. The chief executive of the GHURC said:

“Network Rail has said that the future of Gloucester central station is not in doubt and confirmed its intention to retain the station and invest in improvements”.

The Government have done that. Most notably, the previous Secretary of State for Transport reached an agreement with Great Western Railway in the previous Parliament. One of the crucial issues about that agreement was an investment by Great Western Railway in a new, additional car park on the south side of the station. For the first time in the station’s 150 or 160 years, it got a new entrance from the south side. It links the hospital on Great Western Road and my constituents who live on the south side of the city. That was a considerable step forward.

Additionally, during the last few years, thanks to co-operation with Great Western Railway, we have a new lift for disabled passengers, the elderly and those with heavy baggage. For the first time, they can cross from platform 2 to platform 4. We have a canopy on the bridge that crosses the railway tracks, again for the first time in the station’s history. We are also looking at a series of improvements to the station infrastructure, including the underpass that goes under the railway lines, the nature of the forecourt and a new exit out of the current car park on to Metz Way. There is an application in for the next round of the growth fund.

I am confident that we will be able to achieve more improvements to the station infrastructure, but no station is better than the trains that arrive there, and that is the crucial issue that is missing. CrossCountry has no intention of delivering more services. The managing director said in his letter of 15 December that

“as has been explained before, at this time it is neither operationally possible nor commercially viable to increase the number of CrossCountry services at Gloucester station...it was apparent that the current railway infrastructure could not accommodate the inclusion of more stops at Gloucester”.

One of the reasons that the Department gave was that work at the Filton end of the entrance to Bristol station would impede additional stops at Gloucester. In fact, there are two lines there. They have been there for ever—there will always be two lines there, and there will be two more once the electrification has taken place. A stop at Gloucester should not impede anyone operationally from being able to go into Bristol. Indeed, Network Rail confirmed to me on the telephone that in the grander scheme of things, two additional stops a day would be frankly a relatively minor tweak to the operational schedule.

I want to leave a key point with the Minister today. He has been extremely helpful and has seen me several times, as did his predecessor. He wrote to me:

“I can assure you that there are two additional calls at Gloucester in the new Franchise Agreement which CrossCountry are funded for, and obliged to deliver, as soon as they are able to do so.”

That is very reassuring; two extra services a day means 730 extra services a year. That would hugely help my constituents in getting to work and traveling north and south with much greater ease. However, I do not have confidence that CrossCountry will live up to the Minister’s expectations. The crucial words in his letter are

“as soon as they are able to do so.”

I am afraid that CrossCountry’s letter makes it absolutely clear that it has no intention of doing so. In my last debate before Christmas, I finish with the irony of CrossCountry’s slogan, which is: “Going that bit further”. On this occasion, it has absolutely gone the opposite way.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Flello, I think for the first time. I had not even taken on board that you were in such an august position. I am delighted to see you there. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) for calling this debate and for being such a persistent advocate on behalf of the people of Gloucester. He is a textbook example of persistent, gentle, non-stop
lobbying on the causes on which he is rightly passionate. We can all learn a lesson from him on how never to give up and how to persist on issues.

My hon. Friend raised this matter at Prime Minister’s questions recently. He regularly updates me on his offline conversations with Network Rail and CrossCountry. No one could be more helpful in ensuring that I get the full range of views on what is going on. Both he and my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) have been sensible and pragmatic in how they have approached the issue. They recognise that no solution is viable that sees any diminution in services to Cheltenham or Gloucester, and that is an important baseline from which we have to start.

As my hon. Friend has set out, Gloucester has very well timed connections into and out of the main line of the long-distance inter-city CrossCountry network. There are 36 services from Cardiff to Birmingham, Derby and Nottingham, all of which stop at Gloucester. It is in the southern direction that there is a problem. Sheffield, Leeds, Newcastle, Manchester and Edinburgh can all be reached hourly with one change on the same platform at Cheltenham Spa and a 10-minute wait. The same applies for trains to Bristol and Plymouth, but with a 10 to 15-minute wait. One still has to change trains, and take luggage off and put it back on; it is by no means ideal. For Birmingham to Bristol services to serve Gloucester, trains need to be diverted off the main line. If those services called at Gloucester, it would increase the overall journey time by approximately 10 minutes.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, we asked CrossCountry to explore the potential for additional Gloucester calls from December 2017. As he knows from the correspondence, CrossCountry has confirmed that, in its view, that is not deliverable, operationally or commercially, at present. Crucially, the requirement to run two additional services, should it become operationally possible to do so, is included in the CrossCountry franchise agreement. It is not a matter of whether CrossCountry would like to do so in an ideal world, but of whether it is possible for those services to operate on the network. I understand that it is impossible to find a workable solution that would allow the extra services to be deliverable in December 2017. I will certainly discuss the reasons with CrossCountry and hope to work closely with CrossCountry to see what can be done in the short term, should circumstances change; in the medium term, we will try to bring forward the extra services as soon as possible.

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As my hon. Friend desribed the email he received on the punctuality of services, I was interested to hear about that. I am sure my officials have taken note of the details. If he will share the email with me, I will look carefully into that, because he put forward a persuasive narrative about punctuality and a buffer that was built in. I would be concerned if that were the case, and if it were an obstacle to further services calling at Gloucester. After extensive research, which included modelling timetable options with Network Rail, the latter has formally advised CrossCountry that it will not be possible to deliver additional station calls for Gloucester from December 2017 as there is not enough capacity on the network to accommodate the trains at present.

Richard Graham: The Minister is being very gracious, but has he been able to confirm Network Rail’s view of the CrossCountry comment that it is impossible to do this? As he rightly says, the business of whether there is time built in to allow for delays on that service may provide part of the answer to his question.

Paul Maynard: It may well do, although I should point out that I think he has misconstrued some of my previous comments on Filton Bank and the operational bottleneck that occurs there. The work that is ongoing at Filton Bank to double the track capacity from two tracks to four is about enabling extra services by expanding track capacity. That work is not an impediment to the extra two services; it is what will enable them. That is why Network Rail is saying to the Department that there is not sufficient capacity on the network. Given that I have been in the debate since I heard the news, we have not had a chance to put the points about the timetable to Network Rail to get further information. That could change the situation, and we will get back to my hon. Friend if it does.

CrossCountry is a second-tier operator on all parts of the network; it is not the dominant franchise holder. That makes flexibility in its timetables significantly harder to achieve, because it answers to the dominant operator on any part of the network, particularly in and around Bristol and Birmingham. In a sense, the start and end points of its flows from north to south are determined by the wider national timetable. That can make it difficult to alter its timetables. We have to be certain that the intermediate stops and timings are robust and accurate, as my hon. Friend points out. The delay to these already on the train is a material point when considering a business case for altering service levels. Although the benefit-cost ratio for any intervention is merely a number and is not the entire story, it is part of the story that the Department and train operators have to take into account.

The blockage to providing additional station calls at Gloucester is predominantly a lack of network capacity and fixed capacity constraints at either end of the line in Birmingham and Bristol. I understand that my hon. Friend’s preference is for CrossCountry to offer a good service to his constituents who commute to and from Bristol. Not only should they be able to rely on local Great Western Railway services, but they should have access to a faster non-stop alternative to existing services. It is important that we look at what more GWR can do to increase capacity on that important commuter flow. CrossCountry has already had discussions with Network Rail on the improvements in Bristol and the impact that they can have on its potential to deliver more services. We will continue to work with both CrossCountry and Great Western to see how the service that Gloucester receives can be improved in the short term.
In the longer and medium term, we still need to work closely with CrossCountry to see whether passengers at Gloucester can get more frequent calls in the day. This will include looking at a full reworking of the timetable as part of the impending refranchising process. Post High Speed 2, a reduction in services through Birmingham New Street may open up the possibility of revised timings and more capacity. That is a priority for the Department. We are engaging our own technical advisers to look in further detail at operational deliverability and the financial and economic business cases, so that more can be done for the people of Gloucester.

With more and more people using our railways since privatisation 20 years ago, passenger journeys have doubled. That is also true for CrossCountry, which has seen growth from 32 million passenger journeys in 2007 to 37 million in 2015, leading to demand outstripping capacity in a number of places. We need to ensure that demand meets capacity, both on the CrossCountry network, and more widely across the national network. That is why the new timetable proposed from December 2017 seeks to provide additional annual seats, improving the journeys for passengers up and down the land.

As my hon. Friend knows, we recently announced a new direct award for Arriva to operate the CrossCountry franchise. This will deliver additional benefits for passengers: free wi-fi; upgrades to 4G connection, which will increase download speeds; improved access to better information systems; and 24/7 customer services. I recognise that all that is of benefit only if there are trains that passengers can board at the stations where they want to board them, and that includes Gloucester.

In conclusion, I note that CrossCountry has continued to do extensive research at the Department’s behest to try to find ways of calling at Gloucester on the Birmingham to Bristol CrossCountry route, but that has not been possible in time for the December 2017 timetable.

Richard Graham: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: I will, happily, in the remaining minute and a half.

Richard Graham: The Minister is very kind. As he said in his letter, CrossCountry is funded to deliver extra services in the new franchise agreement, which has already started, and the new timetable comes in in December 2017. I understand from Network Rail that the new timetable is not yet finalised, and will not be until March. Does he agree that there is still an opportunity for Network Rail to work with CrossCountry to identify how the timing of the trains—we are not talking about additional trains—can deliver the services in the new timetable from December 2017?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend is essentially right. I will try to answer that point, but it deserves far more than a minute. The crucial phrase is “operational capacity of the network”. If the service can be delivered within the network’s operational capacity, it should be delivered. As it stands now, I do not believe there is operational capacity, but I need to test that theory against the points my hon. Friend has made regarding the timetable to see whether that frees up any space on the network. If it does not, there is an ongoing CrossCountry consultation on the new timetable. Unless there is physical space on the network between Birmingham and Bristol to run the extra services, I do not see how they can be introduced to the network merely because both he and I wish that they could. I commit to keep working hard on this matter on his behalf, and to delivering on this as soon as I possibly can.

Robert Flello (in the Chair): Order. Merry Christmas!

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
Child Poverty

[PHILIP DAVIES in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered child poverty.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Let me share with the House my reasons for tabling this debate. My passion for campaigning against child poverty stems from the reasons why I stood for Parliament. It is a motivation that I know is shared right across this Chamber, because we all serve in politics to change lives. For me, that means that no child in Britain should grow up in poverty. We should not simply accept a situation where luck of birth can hold a person back throughout their lifetime. Those who grow up in poverty are more likely to fail behind in school, less likely to secure a stable job in the future and more likely to suffer from ill health in later life. This debate is about making sure that Britain is a country that gives every child the opportunity of the best start in life.

I want to rebuild a cross-party consensus and to welcome the sentiments expressed by the Prime Minister as she stood on the steps of Downing Street. She signalled a fight against “burning injustice”, with an unambiguous pledge to “do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you.”

I agree, because to succeed in the future we must create a country that makes the most of all our talents. That is the task facing all of us in this place. We should be judged by whether we do right by the next generation.

In my Barnsley constituency, more than one in four children grow up in poverty, so I stand here today to give a voice to those 5,114 children. The Minister will know that in her constituency, too, more than one in four children grow up in poverty. Surely we can find common ground on the need for a target to change those alarming figures, so that the children we represent here today can have the brightest possible future.

In Britain today, an average of nine children in a class of 30 grow up in poverty. For those nearly 4 million children, that can mean living in a cold and cramped home, falling behind in school and not being able to join in activities with friends. The Children’s Commission on Poverty empowered young people to share their own experiences of poverty. Over 18 months, the commissioners investigated how poverty affects their peers at school, even within schooling. This should never be right in one of the world’s richest countries.

Poverty means children often have to dress differently and therefore stand out. A classmate described the situation:

“I saw some kids that didn’t have blazers or coats in winter and I could see they couldn’t afford it.”

Pupils shared how those in poverty do not all qualify for free school meals if their parents are working. When that is the case, a meal at lunchtime may not always be affordable, a situation that one child describes:

“It depends really on what my mum’s situation is. If I don’t have the money, I normally just wait until I get home [to eat].”

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is doing an excellent job setting out the problem that we sadly still face with child poverty in this country. Is he aware of the work of the holiday hunger campaign? Children who have free school meals during term time have a six-week-long summer holiday where they do not have access to those free school meals, and many of them go hungry. The campaign is doing excellent work.

Dan Jarvis: I am aware of that campaign, which is doing incredibly important work in providing food and nourishment for children during the school holidays. I will be saying a little more about the problem she raises later in my speech.

For those who do receive free school meals, their poverty status can be highlighted by how they are required to buy their lunch with a token, which can hold up the queue as their card is inspected. Those children’s experiences should give us pause, for a renewed focus on child poverty, that understands the experience of those who live it every day.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that schemes such as we have in Scotland, where all children in primary 1 to primary 3—aged five to seven—are given a free school meal, help get rid of some of the stigma attached to school meals.

Dan Jarvis: I absolutely agree. Just as I am seeking to build a cross-party consensus in the campaign against child poverty, I am seeking to build a consensus in every corner of our country. Again, I will say a little more about that later.

By seeking to understand the experiences of those who live in poverty every day, we can help to build a fairer country—one that delivers the vision set out by the Prime Minister as she took office. Let us be clear: that is now urgent. The Institute for Fiscal Studies projects the biggest increase in relative child poverty in a generation: the number of children growing up in poverty is expected to grow by 50% by 2020.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am really pleased that my hon. Friend has secured this debate, because it is very easy at Christmas-time for there to be an orgy of consumption and we need to think about the families who are not going to share in that. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about what is coming down the tracks. Does he share my concern that, having dissed the idea of relative poverty, the Government have been trumpeting the fact that relative poverty did not fall in the last five years? More important, does he share my concern that changes made in the Budget by the previous Chancellor after the general election mean that every family in the bottom third of the income distribution is going to be worse off?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. I know that she has a long-standing interest
in the subject of child poverty, which I will refer to a bit later in my speech. She raises the issue of poverty being relative, which reminds me of a quote:

“Even if we are not destitute, we still experience poverty if we cannot afford things that society regards as essential. The fact that we do not suffer the conditions of a hundred years ago is irrelevant... So poverty is relative—and those who pretend otherwise are wrong.”

That quote was from David Cameron.

I was reflecting on the projection from the Institute for Fiscal Studies of the biggest increase in relative child poverty in a generation, with the number of children growing up in poverty expected to grow by 50% by 2020. The Government have a choice to make and the power to stop that increase happening. Their decisions will shape what kind of country we live in.

Yet what have we recently learned of the Government’s approach from their response to my parliamentary questions? We have learned that the child poverty unit has been closed. Eliminating child poverty is no longer the goal of policy. The Government admit that no money is being directly invested by the Department for Work and Pensions to develop evidence on what early interventions best support children and that a maximum of only seven civil servants support the Government’s Social Mobility Commission. That is not a record that matches the Prime Minister’s rhetoric.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I am very pleased indeed that it is taking place. There is another aspect of this, which no doubt he will touch on in the course of his speech. This is not just about children living in poverty now and the projected increase of 50%, which is very alarming news, although the Government do not seem to be concerned. It is likely that the children who are growing up in poverty now will themselves have children who will live in poverty, so the problem will continue through successive generations unless firm steps are taken to decrease substantially the number of children living in such conditions.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend speaks with great experience of these matters. He is absolutely right: this is about investing in the future not just of those young people but of our country. By ensuring that young people get the best possible start at the earliest of ages, we ensure the best possible life outcomes not just for them and their families but for us as a society and a country.

Clearly, the reasons why people live in poverty are unique to each individual, but there are shared experiences and similar causes. At the most basic level, it is about families and individuals simply not having enough money to cope with the circumstances in which they find themselves. We cannot be serious about tackling the problem unless we include income in our analysis of child poverty and our policy response. Getting this right will mean that families have greater security in their home and at work, and that all families have an adequate income to avoid poverty and live decent lives.

That a family’s income shapes the quality of childhood is easily understood. Every family wants the very best for their children, and parents often go without to achieve that. Research from the Russell Trust shows that one in five parents in the UK either skipped meals or relied on friends or family to feed their children last year. Of course, money is not everything—we all know that the most important factors are love and attention—but that does not mean it is nothing. Income is a central factor in meeting children’s needs, and the Government’s forthcoming social mobility Green Paper, a successor to the long-delayed and unpublished life chances strategy, cannot be adequate without addressing child poverty.

Tackling in-work poverty is critical. Two in three children in poverty grow up in a household in which a parent works, so the reality is that work no longer provides a guaranteed route out of poverty. Our response must be to have a wider approach to tackle insecurity at work, to better understand the increase in zero-hours contracts and to deliver a real living wage for more workers. To support people on low incomes, we need to do more to provide opportunities for progression.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Has the hon. Gentleman considered a universal basic income as part of a package of support for those at that end of our society?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman tempts me down a road, but I will resist the opportunity to get into that slightly different debate. He may seek to make further points later.

I ask the Government to look at the success being delivered at a local level through programmes such as the Workplace scheme in Newham, which identifies the needs of employers to upskill local residents so they can increase their earnings. Childcare must be more flexible and available when and where parents need it. It is one of the biggest tolls on families’ budgets: the cost of childcare pushes an additional 130,000 children into poverty.

The Government’s forthcoming Green Paper must cover income, child poverty and other structural determinants of children’s chances. It must recognise that childhood is a key stage in everyone’s lifetime, making up a fifth of the average lifespan, so it must be about ensuring a good and nurturing childhood as well as what happens next. I hope the Government will take the opportunity to change course so we do not continue on a path that will see more than 1 million children living in poverty over this decade.

Ever-increasing child poverty is not inevitable; it is the result of political choices. We have seen that before: child poverty rose sharply in the 1980s and peaked in the late 1990s, before falling significantly. The previous Government, who happened to be a Labour Government, showed us how. It can be achieved. We should recognise the work of my right hon. Friends the Members for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), and my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), who took the Child Poverty Act 2010 through this House.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate. Will he acknowledge that one of the reasons why the Labour Government were able to maintain progress was the very precise and well tracked measurements and targeting arrangements, which ensured that when
policy was not delivering the required outcomes it was possible to take adjusting action and bring things back on track?

**Dan Jarvis:** My hon. Friend speaks with real authority and experience. I am delighted that she is here to support this debate. She has been incredibly helpful and generous with her time in supporting the work that I have been doing recently. I am very grateful for that point. She is absolutely right. As somebody said to me just the other day, “If it doesn’t get measured, it doesn’t get done.” If we are serious about achieving something, it is important that we set a target.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to refer to the previous Labour Government, who put children first and delivered the biggest improvement in tackling child poverty of any EU nation. In 1997, more children were living in poverty in Britain than in almost any other industrialised nation, but by 2010 we had lifted 1 million children out of poverty. That happened not by accident but because the Government set themselves a target and made achieving it a priority. Investment in higher-quality early years education, childcare and Sure Start centres was expanded fourfold. Support for families was expanded to enable them to enjoy greater control over their lives and greater security in their finances. The tax credit system was introduced and maternity leave was doubled.

We should pay tribute to the leadership of Gordon Brown—I know that will give you particular pleasure, Mr Davies—who legislated for a child poverty target with support from parties across the House. I am reminded of the former Prime Minister’s memorable observation that “children are 20% of our population but 100% of our future.”

We have a duty to this generation to make progress on addressing child poverty once again, because it should scar our conscience as much as it does our children’s futures.

I genuinely believe that all of us in this Chamber feel that responsibility and want child poverty to fall but, as in life, if the Government want to achieve something, it is useful to set a target. The focus of debate should be exactly what the Government wants to have done and by when. Targets let those responsible for delivery know what needs to happen, so that they can plan, monitor and deliver.

The Library goes on to explain that targets

“allow organisations to be held to account on whether they meet the targets, including by Parliament. They can provide a focus on long-term strategic goals in areas where short-term pressures would otherwise mean that these goals might not be achieved.”

That is why I believe that setting a target can help to realise a common purpose to tackle child poverty that includes communities, employers and government at every level.

My private Member’s Bill provides the House with an opportunity to make that intention clear. It will receive a Second Reading on Friday 3 February and I hope that it earns the support of Government. Parliament has a strong record on working across parties on the issue, most notably in passing the Child Poverty Act 2010, which committed the Government of the day and future ones to take action to eliminate child poverty. With my Bill, I do not seek to be prescriptive about what the target should be. Rather, we should be clear that our goal is that no child should grow up in poverty and that we will measure our progress with a target.

I hope that the Chair has noted my repeated efforts to convey that my private Member’s Bill is not politically motivated. It is too important and too urgent for that. In your constituency, Mr Davies, about one in five children grow up in poverty—3,743 children. Simply put, the present situation is unacceptable and without action what will follow will be worse still. Outside Parliament, consensus is growing that the Government need to do more and quickly.

I take this opportunity to place on record my thanks to those charities and stakeholders that recently attended a round-table event I hosted here in Parliament. We should all recognise the vital work that the sector undertakes every day to help those living in poverty. The Child Poverty Action Group has long campaigned on the issue, and I am proud to have its support for my Bill. Barnardo’s, the Children’s Society, Bottle UK, Gingerbread, the Family and Childcare Trust, Save the Children, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation or JRF; and the Equality Trust all have my profound thanks for their input. I hope that there will be others.

I am happy to meet the Minister or one of her colleagues in the new year to share the extent of support for a target among those who know the most about the issue. It is a concern, however, that the Government have been active in seeking to change how we understand child poverty while also removing a duty to reduce it. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 replaced the reporting obligations of the 2010 Act, bringing in the life chances measures of worklessness and educational attainment. The Child Poverty Commission became the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, and is now just the Social Mobility Commission. In answer to a parliamentary question, we have learned that its crucial work is supported by only seven civil servants, at most, and this week we learned, with some concern, that the child poverty unit has been quietly abolished, without adequate information on that fact being provided to Parliament.

No child poverty target, no child poverty unit, no staff resources and no stated intention to end child poverty—no matter how many children are set to grow up in poverty in the years ahead, we can and must do much better than that. We can see that from projects all over the country, because local communities have not been able to wait for the Government to take action. In my Barnsley constituency, we have a campaign bringing together members of the community and the local council to take action.

As part of the campaign, we asked the public to name just one thing that could make a difference to children locally. Ideas ranged from new requirements to develop affordable housing or to expand childcare, to the great example set by retired teachers lending their expertise to tutor local students. That has informed the ongoing work of Barnsley Council’s anti-poverty board. The campaign brings local partners together to support
residents affected by Government spending cuts and welfare reforms. They have been working hard to identify families most in need and to target resources to provide debt advice, information on fuel policy initiatives and healthy eating programmes.

We recently opened a community shop in my constituency. It has agreements with many of the largest food manufacturers in the local area, redistributing good quality surplus products at much more affordable prices.

Mr Winnick: In a number of boroughs—certainly mine, which has a good deal of child poverty, unfortunately—the provision for nursery education means that we have very good schools for under-fives. Those schools are much appreciated, because many of those who attend come from households with low incomes. Is my hon. Friend aware that so many involved in nursery education have written to us to express deep concern that funding arrangements will so alter in the next two years that some of those nursery schools and classes will have to either close down completely or reduce the number of children attending?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right to draw our attention to that pressing concern. One of the primary motivations for the debate is to draw attention to the fact that the plight of almost 4 million children in our country is set to get worse, not better. That is a matter of profound concern to all of us. We all believe that child poverty should and must be reduced and that we have a responsibility to work together in order to achieve that stated aim.

Earlier, hon. Members drew attention to projects that seek to provide food for children during the school holidays. The community shop proposal that I mentioned might be of benefit in that and, as I said, one such shop has just opened in my constituency. After agreement with local food manufacturers, the community shop can sell good quality food at affordable prices to people on low incomes, and it can also help local people with other issues that might be holding them back. It can provide advice on financial matters, or train individuals to prepare for job interviews.

The community shop, brilliantly led by John Marren, is only one example—but a good one—of the crucial work going on around the country to support families living on low incomes and in poverty. Lives are changed by such initiatives, in which people come together to speak up for the less fortunate and to share their time and expertise to be good neighbours in the service of others.

I take this opportunity to recognise the efforts in this area of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). As hon. Members know, he has a long-standing interest in understanding poverty and remains a powerful advocate. He has championed the Feeding Britain project, which works to reduce food poverty at local level. In the new year I look forward to welcoming Rosie Oglesby, its chief executive, to Barnsley to discuss the matter further.

I have made the point that across the country, in all our nations, we see ongoing work that makes a difference. The Scottish Government are consulting on proposals to establish a Scottish child poverty target. The Welsh Government have a responsibility to report on progress towards achieving their child poverty objectives. In Northern Ireland, the Executive’s child poverty strategy commits them to eradicating child poverty in the future. Those efforts must now be backed by the UK Government.

I shall briefly set out the reasons why the Government should prioritise early years interventions. Too many children are stuck following a path that was set for them in their infancy. The importance of children’s early years in forming their life chances is well understood. The House should note the longstanding contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) in campaigning for better early-years provision and conducting an independent review in the previous Parliament.

Today, a child born in a deprived area is likely to die nine years earlier than someone from a wealthier postcode across town. To put that right will require us to bring together Government, campaigners and educationalists to learn from best practice internationally. Theirworld’s 5 for 5 campaign is leading a global effort to do just that, focusing on the five things that shape a child’s basic care: good nutrition; healthcare; learning; play and protection; and, of course, a loving home environment. We should recognise the ongoing work of Theirworld and its president, Sarah Brown. By the time a child reaches the age of five, about 90% of their brain development is complete. We will best tackle the growing gap between the richest and the rest, both in and out of school, by thinking bigger about how to reinvigorate early-years provision through programmes such as Sure Start, rather than by accelerating the cuts we have seen since 2010.

Just as quality teaching makes all the difference in the classroom, a well-skilled nursery workforce led by early-years teachers is proven to help to prevent the poorest children from falling behind. One in five children, and a third of the poorest children, arrive at primary school having fallen behind in the key elements of school-readiness, and we should recognise Save the Children’s campaign to address that. I ask the Minister to lead discussions with colleagues across Government on how every child can benefit from an early education led by qualified early-years teachers.

In my Barnsley constituency, three in five children who attend an independent nursery do not have access to support from a qualified early-years teacher. A child’s education can provide a route out of poverty, building on a foundation that is laid in the early years. That is why I am so proud to champion City Year UK, a charity that empowers young people aged 18 to 25 to serve others in tackling educational inequalities. Through spending a year volunteering in disadvantaged schools, those involved develop lifelong leadership skills and become role models to raise the aspiration of others.

The current evidence demonstrates how the Government are not getting it right—by investing in a new generation of grammar schools, which the evidence shows do not deliver; by not investing enough in building the evidence base for early-years interventions; and by accelerating the closure of Sure Start children’s centres, which work so well. Policies across Government must seek to make a difference to children. Changes to tax and benefits over the next four years will take more than £10 from the pockets of the poorest families, and that is why the Government should end the freeze on working-age benefits.
The four-year freeze promises to be the primary driver of increased poverty. Ending it would be not only morally right, particularly with prices at the tills set to rise, but sound economics. Less well-off households spend more of the money they have than better-off ones so, as well as a clear moral case for action on poverty, there is a sound economic one. It is estimated that £1 in every £5 of public spending is associated with poverty, and that that costs the UK taxpayer £78 billion. As well as redirecting public spending, poverty worsens the key economic challenges we face. It lowers productivity and limits spending power, which undermines the strong economy we need for the future. But the human cost is the greatest of all, which is why the Government’s penny wise but pound foolish approach to investing in children must end. Poverty destroys childhoods and limits futures. Stopping that, as the Prime Minister has pledged, should be the defining mission for this and for any Government. In times of profound change, those with privilege and wealth have a security that is not afforded to those without.

In setting out the reasons why child poverty should be prioritised, I have sought to take a constructive approach and find common ground. I have detailed the case for a target to reduce child poverty and highlighted the support of organisations with real experience and expertise. Will the Minister tell us the Government’s position on establishing a child poverty target? We can end child poverty so that every child can realise their potential. That has to be our ambition and it should be a challenge that unites us all. Through that effort, we can provide security, opportunity and hope to those who need it most. If the Prime Minister’s words in Downing Street mean anything—and we will judge this Government by their actions, not their rhetoric—the Government must set a target.

I am very proud to represent Barnsley, and I see at first hand the difference that the Government’s policies make to so many of my constituents. In standing up for them and their futures today, I am reminded of our Barnsley motto, “Spectemur agendo” or “judge us by our actions”. That will be my guiding principle today, in setting out the reasons why child poverty should be prioritised. I am determined to see a Government that does not stand for a penny wise but pound foolish approach to investing in children, but rather one that is prepared to look at the battle against child poverty, so let us set ourselves a target and take action.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. I pay special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for introducing it and for his work on the issue.

Everyone in this House knows why child poverty matters. My hon. Friend explained the reasons: it blights childhoods, damages children’s long-term outcomes and potential in adult life, and brings a heavy cost to society in the loss of skills, in the loss of contribution to our economy and in the cost to our public services of putting right the damage that is done. The experience of child poverty is felt in a number of different dimensions, including children’s educational experience and participation, their physical and emotional health and wellbeing, the quality of the housing and environment in which they live, and the quality of their social and family lives. That was explicitly recognised in the Child Poverty Act 2010, which included an obligation for the Government nationally and for local authorities to bring forward child poverty strategies to address the different dimensions of child poverty. Indeed, I hope those dimensions may be replicated in strategies that our new metropolitan mayors will develop on a larger geographic footprint. I invite those who are putting themselves forward as potential candidates for that office to think about the options and opportunities to develop child poverty strategies for their city areas.

We have had many measures and indices across the broad experience of poverty. I will mention just two. The Labour Government’s “Opportunity for all” included a set of indicators introduced in 1999 that was mysteriously—and, in my view, regrettably—abandoned by the Labour Government some years later. “Opportunity for all” was not focused specifically and exclusively on outcomes for children, but it presented a range of dimensions of poverty, exclusion and disadvantage, which I invite the Government to consider as they reconstruct their approach to measuring and identifying poverty and disadvantage. There was much to commend in “Opportunity for all” and I hope that the Minister is prepared to look at it.

More specifically in relation to children, the excellent UNICEF child wellbeing report card has been produced by the Innocenti Research Centre over recent years. It has looked again at a range of dimensions of child poverty and child wellbeing. What the indices have particularly highlighted and what commentators and researchers have asserted for many years is that, alongside all those different dimensions of poverty, as my hon. Friend has said, it is important for us to recognise that adequate income is key.

Adequate income is key for a number of reasons. Family income and the incomes that children enjoy within their family circumstances can be correlated with a range of other socioeconomic outcomes, over the range of indicators that I described a moment ago. Poor children and children in low-income families, as my hon. Friend has said, suffer poorer educational outcomes, and less potential is realised in adulthood. It is important, therefore, that we focus on the correlation between low income and a range of other disadvantages.

It is also important to measure income and relative income, as my hon. Friend said, because it is a measure of social participation and a way of ensuring that the poorest in our country do not get left behind as society becomes more prosperous and developed. If we were unwilling to look at a progressive measure of poverty, such as the measure of relative poverty, we would leave families and children behind in the context of social progress. For example, when my grandparents were children, it was considered perfectly acceptable not to have an indoor bathroom, which was not a measure of poverty. In a developed economy such as ours, we would consider that an absolute outrage today.

Relative income poverty is also an aspect of the measurement of equality. There is cross-party concern about the need to narrow inequality gaps. I hope that the Minister will comment on that helpful dimension to tackling inequality.
Measuring income enables us to compare and track our progress internationally. That will be particularly important because the UK, along with other countries, has been signed up to universally target family incomes, such as the disregard. It will be important for us to have measures of poverty to show our progress against that goal, which applies as much within the UK’s domestic context as it does to the UK’s seeking to eliminate poverty in developing countries around the world through its international aid efforts.

Most importantly, in a market economy such as we live in, income confers choice, dignity, autonomy, and status. It is humiliating—children feel the humiliation—for parents not to have enough money for their children to have the same experiences as their peers. When low-income parents have more money at their disposal, they spend it on things that are good for their children: on fresh fruit, vegetables, educational activities, outings, and on improving the quality of home life through paying off debt and improving the condition of the family home.

It is regrettable that the focus on income poverty that was explicit in the Child Poverty Act—not exclusively the focus of the Act, as some have liked to suggest, but exclusively in the Act—has been removed from statute by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, as my hon. Friend said, and replaced by measures in relation to educational attainment and worklessness. Those are, of course, both important to improving family income and addressing family poverty, but, as the majority of poor children are now growing up in working households, focusing on worklessness and not on in-work poverty misses the point and ensures that we overlook the necessary policy change.

As I often hear Ministers say, work should be the best route out of poverty, but too often today it is not. We have an obligation as a society to look after those who cannot work or who perhaps cannot work enough and cannot secure enough from earnings to provide and secure the necessaries for their children.

The Welfare Reform and Work Act has diverted attention from the importance of income, and it is doing so at a time, as my hon. Friend said, when things are about to get a lot worse. In 2017 we will see very many more children miss the point and ensures that we overlook the necessary policy change.

The Welfare Reform and Work Act has diverted attention from the importance of income, and it is doing so at a time, as my hon. Friend said, when things are about to get a lot worse. In 2017 we will see very many more children.

We cannot have the pick and mix approach that we have today. First, we need policies that specifically address the incomes of the poorest families. I invite the Minister to look again at the way in which universal credit can be redeveloped to return to its original purpose to incentivise and reward work and increase amounts of paid work. We should reprioritise the financial support specifically designed to meet the needs of parents in raising their children. That means that the restrictions on benefits for children that we have seen in recent years must be reversed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central has rightly said, we need a much more determined strategy of investment in the services and support to help to produce the best long-term outcomes. I strongly endorse the call for a focus on early years childcare and education and for a cross-government approach.

I also support my hon. Friend when he says that we must reinstate meaningful and relevant targeting and tracking of progress. The social justice Green Paper offers Ministers an opportunity to bring forward targets that will focus attention properly on the problem and enable us to assess the efficacy of potential solutions that capture all the dimensions of child poverty, family income and the wider outcomes that we have discussed. Finally, I suggest we need to underpin our ambitions with clear, firm and focused legislation. I greatly regret the watering down of the Child Poverty Act. As my hon. Friend said, that was put in place with cross-party support. It had support within the Westminster Parliament, in the Parliaments of Scotland and Wales, and across local government. It would be good to return to that consensual approach. If Ministers do not feel that they want to reinstate the Child Poverty Act, which I wish they would, but I fear they may not, may I at least invite the Minister to consider the potential for finally enacting section 1 of the Equality Act 2010? That would bring attention to bear on the wider dimensions of poverty. It could be readily picked up in the social justice Green Paper. I hope the Minister will consider that.

We need a real focus on what works, what makes a difference and how we know we are making progress. We cannot have the pick and mix approach that we have had over the past few years, because times are about to get so much worse for our poorest children. It would be a dereliction of duty on the part of all of us not to take action now to prevent that.

3.19 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this important debate, which is a timely one. Most of us will of course celebrate Christmas with extravagance and excess. It is important to consider...
the fact that many people will struggle through the festive season. The Social Mobility Commission has said that in Glasgow more than a third of children live in poverty. In my constituency there are certainly areas where that figure is one in two children. In this day and age that is frankly scandalous.

I was a teacher before I came to this place and I saw at first hand the effect of child poverty on children's education and life chances. It is almost impossible for a hungry child to learn, and difficult to concentrate when all they have had that morning is a can of juice or a packet of sweets. How can a child from a deprived background hope to compete educationally with their peers? They may not have a bag in which to carry their essentials to school. As the hon. Gentleman has already mentioned, with poverty comes stigma, which can further exclude children from the educational chances that may allow them to progress.

Education should be an enabler, and a way to allow all young people to reach their potential, but the reality is that by the age of three children from deprived backgrounds can already be nine months behind average development, and by the time they start school the difference can be as much as 18 months. For young children that can mean an inability to communicate, vocally or in other ways. They may not understand the simplest instructions. They may have issues with going to the toilet. Poverty has all sorts of impacts on children at that stage. The factors that contribute—poor diet, a difficult home environment, and parents juggling work and child care—show no sign of abating.

I hope that increases in early years education provision across the UK will make a big difference. However, I keep hearing the word “childcare”. In Scotland we talk instead about early years education. In Scotland education starts formally at the age of three. I do not mean learning to read and write; I mean learning to communicate, learning about relationships and starting to work through a simple curriculum. There is a subtle but fundamental difference between childcare and early years education. Childcare is about the parents. It is about supporting them, benefiting them and making their lives more convenient. Of course, it benefits the children as well—I will not deny that. However, early years education is focused 100% on the children. It is about improving their life chances.

There are differences between the early years packages that will be offered across the UK. In Scotland, all children will be entitled to 30 hours of early years education. In England, 30 hours will be offered to children only where both parents are working. That calls into question the purpose of the provision. We should also think about different parents and home environments; what about parents with disabilities or health issues that prevent them from working? Their children, who may already be socially excluded, will be further excluded if they do not have access to their 30 hours, and will miss out on chances that could raise them out of poverty and make a vital difference when they start school.

Other groups also need consideration. Grandparents play a massive role in helping with childcare. Some are the main carers for young children, but no provision is made for them in the 30 hours rule. In fact, they would also need to be in work to get access to the 30 hours of childcare. The Government need to rethink the 30 hours restrictions, and open the provision up to all children, if they are to make a difference in tackling the attainment gap at the very beginning of school.

We need to look at how poverty can be alleviated completely. That means a realistic welfare system that actually allows young children to flourish. As a teacher, I know that young children from deprived backgrounds are a massive untapped resource. They have great potential. The UK has skills gaps in the areas of science, technology, engineering, maths, digital skills and construction. Those skills shortages could be tackled in a serious manner if we created an environment that allowed young children from deprived backgrounds to achieve success.

In Scotland, we are committed to eradicating child poverty. The recently announced baby box will be a box of essential items given to every child born in Scotland, to help to level the playing field at the earliest stages of life. In Scotland, education maintenance allowance is still in place for young people in the later stages of secondary education. We still have free university education, which many of our young people can use. Certainly there will be no return in Scotland to selective education, which locks in inequality, scars children and prevents them from achieving their full potential. No child should have to grow up in poverty in the 21st century in the UK. I should like the Government to take a realistic approach to that problem. Many hon. Members now look forward to spending Christmas in comfort with their children, and we need to think realistically about how to allow all children in the UK to enjoy Christmas.

**Philip Davies (in the Chair):** If each of the two Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen and the Minister stick to 10 minutes each, there should be a little time at the end in which the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) can wind up the debate.

3.27 pm

**Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP):** I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for obtaining this important and timely debate and for his sterling work in pursuing the issue of child poverty. His written parliamentary questions and private Member’s Bill have been important in keeping child poverty on the agenda and making sure that, although it is the last day of term here, we are debating a subject crucial to the children in our constituencies.

At this time families are preparing for Christmas at home, getting the tree ready and wrapping presents, but that is something not available to everyone. Some of my constituents recently got in touch for assistance because they have no money for Christmas presents for their children. Such families are dependent on the charity of organisations such as Glasgow’s Spirit of Christmas, the Salvation Army, and groups working in the Gorbals. There are many voluntary groups in constituencies which people have to approach to ask for gifts for their children. I cannot imagine the heartbreak it must cause parents to know that they just do not have the money—that Santa will not come to their door and their kids will wake up on Christmas morning with perhaps nothing at all.

The way those families have now been stigmatised in this country and been allowed to reach such a situation is nothing short of appalling. One of the families I
mentioned has no recourse to public funds—the mother is working but just cannot work enough to bring in enough money to pay the bills, put food on the table and provide Christmas presents for her children. That is the reality today for families in the UK—the sixth richest nation on earth.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central is correct to point out that the debate is about political choices and Government decisions that affect people in this country. He rightly quoted his town’s motto about judging people by their actions; it is a crucial point that we should take forward. He is also right to point out that the Labour Government made significant progress on child poverty, and I pay credit to them for that. The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) correctly mentioned the significance of tracking, targets and actually having something to work towards. Without that guiding principle, how will we know whether we are making progress? How will we know whether lives are being improved or getting worse?

Let me talk a little about the impact of child poverty beyond the bald statistics, which can be pretty dry. Child poverty is about stigma and isolation, and there is a compounding impact that makes it difficult to escape from the cycle of poverty. In 2010, back when I was a councillor in Glasgow, Save the Children ran a series of events about the lived experience of children in poverty. It created what it called a museum of poverty, which contained things that it wished to banish from reality and ought to be things of the past. Those included pawn tickets, unaffordable fuel, benefit forms, homelessness, cheap, crap food that does people no good, and dinner tickets and tokens, which the hon. Member for Barnsley Central mentioned. Those are all stigmas that people in poverty have to carry around with them. We do not necessarily see them, but those people have to see and feel them every single day.

Things have got worse since 2010. We have let children down. The children who participated in those events may now actually be parents themselves. We now have brutal sanctions, the two-child policy and the rape clause, which will not only stigmatise the families it impacts but hurt them deeply. We have the benefit cap, there are people with no recourse to public funds, and delays in benefits leave people with no option but to go to food banks and rely on the charity of friends, family and strangers.

Kerry McCarthy: Does the hon. Lady agree that unless the Government finally acknowledge that delays to benefits and benefit sanctions are major causes of people going to food banks, we will never reduce food poverty in this country?

Alison Thewliss: Absolutely. The evidence that the National Audit Office and charities across the country have produced on this issue makes that absolutely clear. I spoke to an organisation from Castlemilk, which is not in my constituency but has been working with food banks in my constituency. It had spoken to people who came to the food banks and tried to help them with their issues. Its evidence showed clearly that food poverty was about delays, some of which are built into the system. The six-week wait for universal credit claims leaves people with nothing until that comes through. That is absolutely unacceptable. Most worryingly, that organisation also found that people did not want to challenge things because they were worried about getting into trouble with the Department for Work and Pensions, their job coach or whoever they had spoken to. It is deeply disappointing that that service does not support people but punishes them.

A lot of very good work has been done on poverty in Glasgow. The poverty leadership panel has done a great deal of work. Glasgow City Council, in partnership with Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Glasgow Centre for Population Health and a host of other organisations, produced an excellent report about the cost of the school day that is similar to some of work that the hon. Member for Barnsley Central mentioned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) spoke about the developmental lag in education, which has an impact. There are things inherent in the education system that perhaps not everyone sees but are very important to people living in poverty. That report looked at the stigma about things such as clothes, transport and learning resources, and the impact of poverty on friendships, people’s ability to go on trips, food, and in-school events such as non-uniform days, fundraising events and clubs. People in poverty cannot participate in a great many of those things, and that has a huge impact, particularly on young children. Other children in a class can tell that a child is in poverty, no matter how they might try to cover that up.

The Conservatives in this place are reluctant to see “I, Daniel Blake”, but the example in that film of the wee girl whose shoes had been glued back together but kept falling apart, and the family who could not afford to put shoes on that child’s feet, is heartbreaking. Such experiences are damaging to a child’s health, wellbeing and very sense of identity. My son went through three pairs of school shoes and two pairs of trousers last year in primary 1. I was able to put shoes on his feet, but if I was not able to do that, what impact would going around in Scotland in the rain with wet feet every day have on him? That would be appalling, and many families are left in that situation. Schools in Glasgow have to buy outdoor clothes for kids who cannot afford warm jackets or welly boots so they can participate in outdoor play. So many families are close to crisis—they are an unexpected bill away from crisis—and the benefits system has left them in that situation. There is no dignity or respect there. We need to look at the root causes of poverty to deal with that.

I am glad to be able to say that the Scottish Government are taking action. They have a child poverty Bill out for consultation just now. Our ambition is to achieve change, but we cannot do that on our own. We have access to only 15% of the benefit system. We will do what we can with that 15%—we are committed to bringing in maternity and early childhood benefits to help with some of the expenses of starting school—but although that can be significant, it is only a small part of the picture. We need to look at the root causes.

Peter Kelly of the Poverty Alliance spoke about the missed opportunities in the autumn statement and said it was akin to “being pushed off a cliff with only a pillow to absorb the landing.”

Families are still in very stark situations. It is estimated that because of cuts to tax credits, 200,000 more children will be in poverty by 2020. The two-child policy and
There was a comprehensive strategy to tackle child poverty across the last Labour Government, which is something that our party is proud of, with interventions such as Sure Start and increasing existing social security and new, child-targeted assistance and investment in early years intervention, along with programmes to help lone parents into work. That wide range of actions increased incomes and provided tailored services to help families living in poverty. The recent news that the child poverty unit, set up under the previous Labour Government in an effort to eliminate child poverty, has been abolished is very concerning indeed. That shows that child poverty is becoming far less of a priority for this Conservative Government. Surely we can only tackle child poverty effectively through a concerted strategy across Government.

The Child Poverty Act 2010, brought in by the Labour Government, set four key targets to be met by 2021. They ranged from reducing the proportion of children who live in low-income households to reducing the number of children who experience persistent poverty. However, counterproductively, the current Government decided to abolish the numerical targets based on household income in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 and replace them with a life chances strategy, which has measures such as educational attainment and family breakdown. By removing income targets and focusing on life chances, the Government are failing to tackle the cause of child poverty: lack of money. Growing up in poverty affects children for the rest of their lives. It is in every sense a life sentence.

The life chances strategy was scheduled to be published as far back as June. Now, questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central reveal that the Government will not publish it at all but will instead publish a Green Paper on social justice in the new year. Does the Minister agree that measuring household income is an important means of assessing the prevalence of child poverty across the UK? Will she assure the House that in any new proposal she will retain recognised indicators of income-related poverty?

Thankfully, a defeat in the House of Lords forced the Government to retain a legally binding commitment to measure and publish the number of children living in families on low income. However, that does not mean that they are required to publish a child poverty strategy every three years. Now we learn that it is no longer Government policy to try to eliminate child poverty at all.

The Government have introduced major changes to the social security system that have hit families with children hard. Supporting families to achieve and maintain an income that enables them to meet their needs is a vital element in giving children a good start in life. The major change to the social security system will be the reduction in the amount that someone can earn before their universal credit starts to be withdrawn. Single parents will be hit particularly hard. For example, from next year a single parent with two children working full time on the national living wage will receive £2,586 less a year under universal credit than someone claiming tax credits. The Child Poverty Action Group estimated that a single parent working full time on the national living wage would effectively have to work an extra two months each year to make up for that loss in income. It is utterly impossible for them to do that.
The cuts to work allowances are significant because of their impact in increasing in-work poverty. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the proportion of people in poverty in a working family is 55%, which is a record high. Four fifths of the adults in those families are themselves working—some 3.8 million workers. Those adults who are not working are predominantly looking after their children. Is the Minister concerned that, as a result of her Government’s cuts to universal credit, the huge gains the Labour party made in lifting more than a million children out of poverty will be undone? The Government’s tinkering with the universal credit taper rate at the autumn statement will not address the losses incurred as a result of their previous changes to work allowances.

The Government have promised to make work pay, but that is not happening for the three quarters of children in poverty who are in working families. Will they now reverse cuts to in-work support through universal credit? There is overwhelming evidence that child poverty has a direct causal impact on worsening children’s social, emotional and cognitive outcomes. Anyone who has been a parent—or even who are in the House have been—will have direct experience of that. The very wiring of the brain is affected when children are brought up in poverty. A hungry child cannot learn.

A British Medical Association report published in September highlighted the impact of austerity on children’s health, from increased mortality rates to the likelihood that children growing up in poverty may face greater health problems in later life. A secure, warm home and healthy, nutritious food are basic physiological needs. When those needs are not met, people’s health suffers both physically and mentally. That is particularly the case for children as they are still developing. Being in work or well educated cannot guarantee those essential needs will be met, but having money can.

If the Government will not be moved by moral arguments, perhaps they will be by the economic arguments. The failure to tackle the root causes of child poverty will result in losing a whole generation of future talent and untapped potential. The implications for these children and their families, but also for the country, are stark, yet the Government have cut the staffing of the Social Mobility Commission to the point that it now has more members than staff.

The Prime Minister has abandoned her pledge, made on the steps of Downing Street, to support families who are struggling to get by. I urge the Government to rethink their position on child poverty and reinstate the targets before it is too late.

3.44 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this debate on child poverty, and all Members from across the House who contributed to the discussion. Let me assure all that tackling child poverty and disadvantage and delivering real social reform is a priority for the Government. Our Prime Minister has set out clearly that she is committed to that. That includes taking action that addresses the root causes of child poverty and disadvantage, not just the symptoms.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the tone that he struck during the debate. This is about not just Government policy but everyone, whatever their political hue, at a local level working to combat these issues. That includes Members of Parliament, councils and, as the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) pointed out, many organisations in our communities. The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) made excellent points about the consistency required on targets and the opportunities that come from devolution and local mayors. Those points are well made.

Before I turn to targets, let me briefly touch on the child poverty unit, which was mentioned. The unit’s main function was to support Ministers in exercising their duties in relation to the income-based targets set out in the Child Poverty Act 2010 and the associated child poverty strategy. Following the repeal of those targets, which was explicit in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, responsibility for child poverty policy and analysis transferred to the Department for Work and Pensions. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission secretariat continues to be based in the Department for Education, and the Secretary of State for Education is the lead Minister for that commission.

The Government want to take a fundamentally different approach to child poverty from the one driven by the Child Poverty Act measures and targets. Our approach will tackle the root causes of poverty and disadvantage and drive continued action in the areas that will improve long-term outcomes for disadvantaged children, now and in the future. It is for that reason we rejected the narrow, income-based approach to poverty incentivised through the 2010 Act. In place of that, we have, through provisions in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, introduced two new statutory measures that will drive action on parental worklessness and on children’s educational achievement. Those are the two areas that we know can make the biggest difference to improving children’s long-term outcomes.

The 2016 Act puts a new duty on the Government to report annually on the proportion of children living in workless households, the proportion of children living in long-term workless households, and attainment at GCSE for all children and for disadvantaged children. The groundbreaking analysis conducted by my Department means that we now have a clearer understanding of disadvantage than ever before. We know that children affected by parental worklessness and its associated risk factors, such as family instability, drug or alcohol dependency and poor parental mental health, are disproportionately likely to experience poorer outcomes.

Kerry McCarthy: Will the Minister give way?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry; I would like to make progress, and I do not have much time. I will try to address all the points raised.

It is worth noting that the old Child Poverty Act targets were based on defining a household as being in poverty if its income was below 60% of median household income. That remains the basis for the “households below average income” survey, which is still the definitive source of data on poverty and low income. During the passage of the 2016 Act, the Government made a commitment to continue to publish the data.

I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston about some of the obstacles to women in particular working, and working more hours, such as bunching around 16 hours, multiple caring
responsible and so forth. We recognise that, which is why the Minister of State who holds this portfolio is undertaking a range of work to tackle those issues.

We also know—the evidence is clear—that work is the best way out of poverty. Working-age adults in non-working families are almost four times as likely to be living on a low income. The “Child poverty transitions” report published in June 2015 found that 74% of children in workless families that moved into full employment exited poverty; that 47% of children in workless households were in relative low income before deducting housing costs, compared with only 8% in households in which all adults were working; and that there are 100,000 fewer children in relative low income since 2010.

Kate Green: Will the Minister give way?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry; I want to address these points. The Government’s record on employment speaks for itself. The latest figures show the employment rate at 74.4%, unemployment at an 11-year low and 2.8 million more people in work than in 2010. That is important, because we know that being in work has wider benefits beyond financial ones. There is clear evidence that good-quality work is linked to better physical and mental health and improved wellbeing, and that better parental health is associated with better outcomes for children. That is why we are getting people into employment and working to change attitudes.

We are also introducing reforms to ensure that work always pays and to allow people to keep more of what they earn. We are cutting income tax for more than 30 million people this year and taking 4 million of the lowest-paid people out of income tax completely. By 2018, a typical basic rate taxpayer will pay more than £1,000 less in income tax than in 2010. We are also making sure that people working 30 hours a week on the national minimum wage do not pay any income tax. Together with the introduction of the national living wage, that will give full-time low-paid workers previously on the national minimum wage a pay rise of more than £15 a week. Under universal credit, people are moving into work significantly faster, and staying in those jobs for longer. That crucial welfare reform also increases support for parents; universal credit now provides up to 85% of childcare costs, meaning more support for working families.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central is quite understandably focused on what happens next. The Prime Minister has set up—and chairs—a new Social Reform Cabinet Committee that brings together nine Government Departments to oversee and agree social policy reforms. Its task will be to lead the Government’s work to increase social mobility and deliver social justice. We will bring forward a social justice Green Paper in the new year that will identify and address the root causes of poverty and will build on the two statutory measures we have already set out in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. That is fundamentally different from previous approaches; it is focused on not only the symptoms but the root causes of poverty, and will ensure a clear focus on improving long-term outcomes for the most disadvantaged children.

The Government have a good record on child poverty. There are now 200,000 fewer children in absolute poverty than in 2010 and—under Labour’s own poverty measurements—100,000 fewer children in relative poverty. However, we know that we need to do more. To deliver real social change and real social justice, and to make Britain the country that works for everyone, we will bring forward the social justice Green Paper in the new year. That will say more on our approach to tackling the root causes of poverty and disadvantage. I hope that will be something on which we will be able to build common cause and agree for the common good. Our children deserve that.

3.54 pm

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful for the opportunity to have considered the important issue of child poverty. All of us who serve in this place do so in order to improve the lives of our constituents and the communities that we represent. However, the reality is that an increasing number of children are living in poverty, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies projects that that will increase by 50% by 2020. In practical terms, that means that nine out of 30 kids in every classroom around the country will be living in poverty.

If hon. Members believe, as I do, that that is not only unacceptable but avoidable, all of us—the Government very much included—have an absolute responsibility and a duty to act. It is in our interests to do so. As I said, there is a clear moral argument for doing so, which is frankly enough in its own right, but there is also a clear economic argument for investing in the future and the next generation of talent. Despite what we have heard from the Minister, the reality is that without a target, a clear strategy or a clear focus on making progress, that simply will not happen. The Government are in an incredibly privileged position; they have the opportunity and the power to act. I hope that they will do so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered child poverty.
Brandon Rayat

(Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair)

4 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the case of Brandon Rayat.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am very pleased to see the Minister here. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the case of Brandon Singh Rayat of Leicester today.

Brandon tragically took his own life at the age of 15 on 9 August this year, just 132 days ago, after what has been described by his parents as systematic, appalling and torturous bullying. He was a pupil at Judgemeadow Community College in Evington in my constituency. We are joined today by Brandon's mother, Mina; his father, Rajinder; and his younger brother, Jaydeep.

Mr and Mrs Rayat have informed me that, in the 16 months leading up to his death, Brandon was subjected to repeated physical and psychological abuse by his peers. Because it is so shocking, I will not repeat in great detail the abuse. However, children—children, Mr Hollobone—who used to be Brandon's friends started calling him terrible names. They set up a fake Facebook page, through which they repeatedly sent threats to sexually assault both him and his mother. He was also physically assaulted while at school. No one in this House would disagree when I say that that kind of activity is completely reprehensible.

In May 2015, Brandon was diagnosed as suffering from an acute stress reaction as a result of the bullying. Last November, the abuse became so bad that Brandon stopped attending school altogether. His anxiety turned the mere act of going to school each day into a phobia. He became lonely and isolated, and despite being prescribed antidepressants, his condition did not improve.

Two months before he took his own life, Brandon started to give away all his possessions and money to his loved ones. Brandon's family tell me that despite what had happened, their urgent calls for help went unanswered. In the 16 months leading up to his death, Brandon tried to take his own life on a number of occasions. His parents begged doctors to transfer him to a secure medical unit, but the request was denied by local health services. Brandon repeatedly told his parents that he wanted to take his own life and attempted suicide in both March and July of this year. Despite that, still nothing was done.

Brandon's family spoke to the child and adolescent mental health services, his GP and psychiatric services at the Leicester Royal Infirmary, yet none of them took the action that was necessary to prevent his death. Will the Minister tell the House when she responds what threshold needs to be crossed—for someone like Brandon, or indeed his family, to access the care that he and they so desperately needed?

I have visited Judgemeadow Community College many times during my 29 years as an MP, and until now, I have never received a complaint about something that has happened there. Mr and Mrs Rayat have told me that Judgemeadow Community College was informed of the bullying in November 2015. Mrs Rayat also had a meeting with the school to discuss the abuse and the pupils who were orchestrating this campaign of hate. Indeed, I understand that some of the text messages were shown to the people in authority. Unfortunately, that did nothing to prevent or stem the abuse that Brandon was receiving.

It would be extremely helpful if the Minister told the House what criteria or guidance exist for schools in circumstances of this kind. When did either she or the Secretary of State last write to various local authorities, or perhaps directly to schools, to give them information and guidance as to how they should react in particular circumstances? Not all schools experience activities of this kind, and therefore I would not expect every school and every teacher in the country to be expert in dealing with such matters.

Mrs Rayat has informed me that she also had no success when she approached Leicester City Council. She was told she needed to ask for a health and educational support plan. To get that, she went to the information, advice and support services. Her inquiry was then passed to the council's education team, which said it would need to go to the school to get even more information. After literally running around in circles, Mina Rayat then waited for months without a substantive response. During that time, Brandon was awaiting an evaluation for suspected autism.

That looks to me like bureaucracy failing to act, which affected the reaction times. I am worried about future cases such as this. That is why Brandon's parents wanted me to raise this case in Parliament today. His case should have been a priority. However, I fear there are other examples of the buck being passed between various authorities.

Judging from my meeting with the family at my surgery, it seems that more should have been done to help both Brandon and his family with the events leading up to his death. An inquest into Brandon's death will begin in January, and it is not appropriate for me, Ministers or Parliament to apportion blame to any individual until that has been completed. That is the system we have in this country, and it is one that the family respects, which is why they are prepared for the inquest. However—I speak not as an educationalist but a layperson—it is clear that Brandon was subjected to a barrage of abuse over a long period. It is my understanding, from what his parents have said to me, that the very institutions that are supposed to act as a safety net in situations such as this did not do so.

I do not have all the facts. Those will emerge when the inquest takes place, as well as a possible inquiry, which the family believe is extremely important. However, it seems that the system has failed this young man and this family. Will the Minister outline how this system could be made more effective and easier for families to navigate? These are not people who have had much contact with the education system prior to this occurring, so they do not know how to go through it.

As Members will know, it was National Anti-Bullying Week last month. Mina Rayat launched a campaign to ensure that no other young person or parent goes through the sheer hell that Brandon and his family were subjected to. I would like to put on the record the shining and admirable example of Mina Rayat and her family. She wants to ensure that, although her son has passed away in these tragic circumstances, no other...
family will endure what they have had to endure. Despite being grief-stricken, there is nothing more she could have done. She tried to push a broken system to save her child. To lose a child is the worst pain any parent could imagine, but to use her grief as a force for good is heroic.

What is most worrying is that Brandon’s story is not an one-off. Thousands of children in the United Kingdom are suffering from bullying, both at school and online, and this is contributing to a mental health crisis. This year, 87% more children than last year told Childline that they struggled to access appropriate professional support for their mental health problems. Some 72% of children have reported being bullied online and a quarter of a million children are currently receiving help from NHS mental health services. One third of these cases are related to bullying. These are frightening statistics, but we must bear in mind that many cases are not reported and, in reality, the figures are likely to be much higher.

Some parents may say to their children, when they come home and complain, “You just have to shout back at someone who is attacking you and stand up for yourself, or report it to a teacher.” Parents themselves may not understand the serious nature of what is going on.

Yesterday the Health Committee released its interim report on suicide prevention. It stated that 4,820 people died by suicide in England in 2016. But again, in reality, this figure is likely to be much higher. Suicide remains the biggest killer of men under 49 and the leading cause of death in people aged 15 to 24. My father committed suicide when I was 14. He was just 49 and to this day, all these years later, I still remember the knock on the door, answering that door and being told the news.

The circumstances that give rise to someone taking their own life are a personal issue for some of us, but also a matter of deep public concern. It should be a concern of Parliament and Government. We are in the midst of two separate crises. We have a crisis in youth mental health and a pandemic of bullying in our schools and online. To address this, we need a revolutionary change in the way the authorities provide support to victims.

Can the Minister please tell us that, when the Government refresh—that is the word used in the document—their suicide prevention strategy in January 2017, included in that strategy will be a section on how to address bullying? Will she also ensure that guidance on cases like Brandon’s is at the heart of the strategy across councils and NHS services in the United Kingdom?

Another issue is the bullies. All bullies believe they can push their target to the very edge and suffer no consequences. They may delight in the misery they cause—who knows? Under the current law, sustained harassment and intimidation, including verbal abuse, threats, abusive phone calls and sending abusive emails or text messages are all crimes. However—we have heard this so many times—the internet companies must be held to account even more than at present. They never seem to respond quickly enough to cases of online bullying like Brandon’s. When someone seeks to make a complaint, it is usually found that they are based in another country in some other part of the world, and trying to get to someone to deal with the issue is complicated.

As is all too common, no charges or investigations have been launched against Brandon’s bullies. Perhaps a more serious risk of prosecution would have deterred them. Had Brandon been murdered, criminal charges would have been a certainty. Mina Rayat and her husband have put the implementation of a specific cyber-bullying law at the heart of their campaign to achieve justice for Brandon and others who have found themselves in this terrible situation. Will the Minister give the Government’s view on those proposals? Will she also tell us what further action the Government are taking to deal with internet companies?

I shall end by saying that 2016 has been an unimaginably tragic year for the Rayat family. Unfortunately, Mrs Rayat is not the only mother in my constituency to have approached me this year about the death of a son. I pay tribute to Cheryl Armatrading and Amy Morgan who both lost their sons to knife attacks in Leicester. Cheryl’s son, Antoin Akpom, was brutally murdered in September 2013. His family has yet to receive compensation for his death or an explanation of why his killer was transferred to Leicester by the authorities, which allowed the killer to meet Antoin in a car park and to stab him to death. Cheryl is being supported by the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers), who is working hard on her behalf and is her local MP. I am acting as the constituency MP for Antoin’s son, Aaquil.

Amy Morgan lost her son, Tyler Thompson, to a knife attack in November 2015. Last month, I attended a ceremony marking the first anniversary of his death at the City of Leicester College, hosted by headteacher, Anne Gregory, in Downing Drive in my constituency. Since Tyler’s death, Amy has worked in collaboration with Leicestershire police on their “Lives not Knives” campaign. Some young men in my constituency and across the country are facing a crisis of violence and intimidation, leaving behind them grieving families and broken communities. This violence must stop.

What sort of country do we want to live in? Do we want a country where our children are safe from the kind of bullies and actions that Brandon had to face, or a country where the actions of bullies remain unchecked? We want a country where these issues are raised and bullies are stopped in their tracks before it is too late. When children are suffering bullying to the point where they take their own lives, we need to change our response radically. The system failed Brandon this year. Please, let us ensure that no other child is failed in this way.

4.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for securing this very important debate, for the way he presented this tragic story to the House and for always standing up for his constituents with great dedication and passion. He is a great credit to them.

I express my deepest sympathy to Brandon’s mother, father and brother and to all his family and friends. His untimely and utterly tragic death is the reason why we
are having this debate. We must do all that we can both to stop bullying happening at all and, crucially, to recognise and support the victims.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly asked what we could have done to prevent this tragedy. When children are victims of bullying, it is vital that professionals listen to them and their families and take seriously what they say. The bullying of Brandon and its consequences were not missed—not by his parents, his school or other services. His family tried and tried to get help, and the school and child and adolescent mental health services were involved. All of that needs to be investigated very carefully.

However, as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, Brandon’s tragic death will be the subject of a coroner’s inquiry in the new year. I cannot pre-empt the findings and say at this point what specific organisations such as the Judgemeadow school should have done; that will come out of that inquiry. But whatever comes out of the inquiry, we must ensure that the vital lessons are identified, learned and put into practice to help prevent such a devastating event from happening again and families from suffering in a similar way.

The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of important issues and questions that I would like to address. First, let me say that bullying, for whatever reason and in whatever circumstance, is absolutely unacceptable and has no place in our society. As we have seen, it has had a devastating effect on Brandon’s family, but it has also blighted the lives of many other young people. We cannot simply dismiss bullying as part of growing up. Even when it does not have consequences as appalling as those that we have heard about today, it can have a profound and, in many cases, very long-lasting effect on the lives of children and young people and affect their education and long-term mental health.

The Government have sent a clear message that bullying is not to be tolerated in our schools. Every school is different, and individual schools are best placed to decide how best to tackle bullying as part of a wider set of activities regarding behaviour and discipline. We have trusted our headteachers and school staff to identify the circumstances surrounding bullying in their schools, to prioritise those issues, to drive their own improvement and to share best practice among themselves.

Schools have a specific legal duty to have a behaviour policy, which must include measures to prevent all bullying among pupils, including cyber-bullying. Teachers have powers to tackle cyber-bullying by searching for and, if necessary, deleting inappropriate messages or files on electronic devices, including mobile phones. The role of schools is so important. They must absolutely be held to account for how well they tackle and respond to bullying. That is why Ofsted inspections now look specifically at what schools do, examining their records and procedures and what pupils and parents say about how the issue of bullying is dealt with.

We must ensure that schools are supported to tackle bullying and that they can learn from one another. I was fortunate enough to meet during Anti-Bullying Week a couple of weeks ago some really inspiring teachers who have made a real difference to children’s lives through the way they have addressed the issue. My Department has provided £4.4 million of funding to tackle bullying. That includes £1.6 million for four anti-bullying organisations to support schools in tackling the issue, programmes to look at how incidents can be reported to schools more easily, and training for 4,000 young people to become anti-bullying ambassadors in schools and lead campaigns to empower others. We also recently published dedicated cyber-bullying guidance and an online safety toolkit for schools. Those resources will help schools to understand, prevent and respond to cyber-bullying, and can be accessed on the UK Safer Internet Centre website.

Beyond school, social media bring new challenges for young people. Bullying now goes beyond the school gates, which is why we have given schools greater power to deal with incidents outside school. The Government are absolutely clear that what is illegal online is illegal offline. Whichever bullying is aimed at, it is totally unacceptable. I can fully appreciate the desire of Brandon’s family for a change in the law to make cyber-bullying a specific offence. At the moment, the law does not differentiate between criminal offences committed on social media and those committed anywhere else. That means that the actions are illegal wherever they are committed, whether online, in the street or at school. The law as it stands can be used to prosecute online abuse. It is imperative that the individuals committing criminal offences, whether they are making threats of violence or sending grossly offensive messages, are caught and punished appropriately.

Any death by suicide is an absolute tragedy. Suicide is a leading cause of death among young people, and particularly among young men. Our challenge is to recognise the factors that pose the greatest risk and identify those most at risk, so that we can intervene effectively.

We recognise that our services that provide young people with access to specialist mental health support are in need of transformation. Too often when seeking help, children and their families are passed from service to service and face a succession of barriers and thresholds. The right hon. Gentleman rightly asked what threshold Brandon needed to meet and what an effective service would look like. The challenge to us all is to ensure that services come together to provide effective support to those who need it. The question should be not “Do you qualify for my service?” but “What do we best do between us to provide the support that you need?” To support that transformation, we have made £1.4 billion available to ensure that clinical commissioning groups develop local plans detailing how they will improve all aspects of mental health provision.

Our refreshed suicide prevention strategy will, as the right hon. Gentleman asks, acknowledge bullying as a potential contributing factor to suicide in children and young people and will therefore reference the importance of schools and links with schools. It is vital that schools and mental health services work more effectively and more closely together. We have recently been running a series of pilots on that, and we plan to learn from them. We are also taking forward a range of projects across Government on online mental health safety, including funding research into the effects of the internet on mental health and suicide risk, developing digital resilience strategies for children and young people and working in schools to improve mental health awareness and promote mental wellbeing.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly paid tribute to Cheryl Armatrading and Amy Morgan, who tragically lost their sons to knife crime. The Government’s modern
crime prevention strategy sets out a range of measures to strengthen our response to knife crime, including working with the police and industry to ensure that there are effective controls on the sale of knives, spreading best practice and delivering measures designed to deter young people from carrying knives. We will continue to work with the Home Office to ensure that every step is taken to protect children from violence. We know that intervening early can help to prevent young people from becoming involved in gang and youth violence in the first place. That is one of the priorities in our approach to ending gang violence and exploitation, and we are working with partners to take that forward.

I am really pleased that the right hon. Gentleman has raised this incredibly important issue today. Bullying is completely unacceptable in any circumstances, but especially when it leads to unspeakingly tragic events such as those that we have heard about today. It is vital that everyone is aware of their responsibilities and acts accordingly when they see or hear about bullying, in whatever form it takes. When everyone plays their part in tackling bullying, we will have a society that is respectful and tolerant of all—a place where everyone feels safe and valued. I hope that we can continue to work together to ensure that we build such a society.

I pay tribute to Brandon’s parents and brother for coming here today. I am a mother of two sons and I can only imagine the horrific pain that they have gone through this year. The fact that they have come here to campaign to ensure that other parents do not have to experience the same suffering is incredibly admirable. To do them justice, it will be incumbent on all of us—the Government, councils, health services and schools—to look very carefully at the outcome of the reviews of Brandon’s case and ensure that we all, at every level of the system, make the changes necessary to put the lessons into practice.

Question put and agreed to.
with jobcentre services if they have physical or mental disabilities or are presented with other challenges. However, with the removal of the centre from Castlemilk, the staff fully expect their workload to increase and for people to disengage. They and I can foresee, in a way that the Minister perhaps cannot at this stage, the disproportionate impact on some incredibly poorly off people and some people who are incredibly challenged with physical and mental disabilities. I return to his words in his maiden speech: prevention is better than cure.

The Minister is aware, because I wrote to him, of a specific proposal by the management of Castlemilk jobcentre whereby they will agree a lower rental rate for the Department, if this is about saving money. They do not want to see the jobcentre go. Will the Minister address that issue for me? Langside jobcentre is right across the road from a college campus, in the second most densely populated council ward in all of Scotland. I cannot think of a better place for a jobcentre to be.

The Minister has not just managed to unite the Glasgow MPs and Members of the Scottish Parliament—including the two from his own party who represent Glasgow—against these plans. He has united the Church of Scotland, the trade unions, the Catholic Church in Scotland and two very large communities in my constituency against them.

I will sum up now, to allow as many of my colleagues as possible to speak. My ask to the Minister is very simple: halt these proposals right now, talk to us in a meaningful fashion about how to deliver a proper welfare service to the people of Glasgow, and engage with people in Glasgow by visiting the city during the consultation period. I know that he is coming to Scotland sometime next month to meet Ministers in the Scottish Government, so I seek an assurance that he will also use that visit to come to Glasgow and speak to some of those affected in some of the poorest communities in Scotland’s largest city.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** Order. The debate can run until 5.30 pm. The guideline limits for Front-Bench contributions are five minutes for the Scottish National party spokesman, five minutes for the Opposition spokesman and 10 minutes for the Minister, with three minutes for Mr McDonald to sum up at the end. That means that I need to start calling the Front Benchers no later than 5.7 pm.

I see before me some of the most talented and best looking of the SNP’s representation in Parliament. Five of you have indicated to Mr Speaker that you would like to speak. I intend to call you in the order on the list given to me by the Speaker’s Office—I suspect that the order is to do with who got their application in first. Because you are all on the same side, I hope that you will not speak for too long and deny the person at the bottom of the list the opportunity to speak. You have about five or six minutes each, and Natalie McGarry is going to lead off to show us all how it is done.

4.38 pm

**Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind):** I commend the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for securing this important debate. It is indicative of the strength of feeling among Glasgow’s MPs that we have almost the entire cohort here, as well as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). We are all here to speak to the Minister about the issue and to raise it in the House. Our constituents are watching, because they are concerned about the impact on their communities.

Almost two weeks ago, I was shocked, like my hon. Friends, to learn through the press of the UK Government’s decision to earmark eight jobcentres across Glasgow for closure. That decision would close half of the city’s jobcentres. Two are in my constituency, while a third will close in the neighbouring constituency of Glasgow Central. That impacts on a fourth, Shettleston—the lone jobcentre in the east end to be free from the threat of closure. The plans lack logic and local knowledge and clearly lack input from local stakeholders. For those reasons and a whole host of others, they are inherently short-sighted.

The jobcentre closures in Glasgow are part of Department for Work and Pensions plans to cut its estate by 20%. However, the plan in Glasgow will see a 50% cut in our jobcentres. That prompts the question: why are the Government disproportionately focusing on Glasgow? The Minister pre-empted that point in his letter to Glasgow MPs by saying that Glasgow “is in a unique position within the DWP Jobcentre Plus Estate as it has a greater density of small offices compared to other large Scottish towns and cities.”

I think that he meant that Glasgow is in a unique position, from the view of the DWP, in being convenient for an ideologically driven cost-cutting exercise.

In fact, Glasgow is indeed in a “unique position,” for want of a better phrase: almost half of Glasgow’s residents stay in the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland; the city has been labelled the “jobless capital of Europe”—not a claim that I am happy with, but it is unfortunately a reality—and the unemployment claimant counts in areas of the city and my constituency are double the UK national average. The so-called “unique” position that Glasgow finds itself in, through no fault of its own, illustrates that the UK Government should be doing more to help, not less.

Another issue that the DWP must consider seriously is the increase in demand for a reduced number of jobcentre Plus offices. For example, Shettleston jobcentre—just down the road from my office—currently serves 1,025 welfare recipients. If we added in the areas of Parkhead, Easterhouse and Bridgeston, that figure would more than triple to 3,210, making it one of the biggest jobcentres in the UK, in one of the most deprived areas with some of the highest levels of unemployment. That does not make sense. It would add insult to injury if the Government forced people to travel further, at additional cost, to be inconvenienced in longer queues to receive a poorer service.

What assessment have the Government made of the potential delays for service users? What provisions are in place to ensure that the service provided does not suffer? I fear that if those questions are not answered and the concerns are not adequately addressed, we will be back in this Chamber or elsewhere in the House debating the reforms again. We will say that the Government’s failure to prepare properly and their failure to take heed of our warnings have led to people suffering unnecessarily, with more sanctions and less support.
The hon. Member for Glasgow South made very clear our opposition to the way in which the consultation has taken place. Neither jobcentre in my constituency that is due to close is included in the consultation, but I have grave concerns about those closures, which I spoke to the Minister about in our meeting last week. I raised with him some of the unique challenges in the east end—the hon. Gentleman has also addressed those concerns with him.

Territorialism and the historical gang culture are existing issues in the east end of Glasgow. I believe that the Minister and the DWP flippantly dismissed those serious concerns by pointing out that Shettleston had served as a youth hub jobcentre for four years, ignoring the extensive preparation and engagement work that was done with the police, stakeholders and the jobcentre. The same work has not been done in this situation, when it is more critical given the ages of the claimants, the historical nature of gang violence and the levels of unemployment among the mainly young people involved. It is not sufficient to say that in extreme cases, remote sign-ons would work.

Further, I also brought up with the Minister, as did colleagues, the harm and undue impact on communities such as Easterhouse. Indeed, that area caused the former Secretary of State to have an “epiphany”. Easterhouse is isolated on the edge of Glasgow with inadequate public transport and an already failing town centre, and such communities cannot afford the loss of more infrastructure. Unemployment there is high but there are services nearby, including libraries, the citizens advice bureau and other stakeholders. Removing the jobcentre will destroy that joined-up thinking and make it harder for people to access services.

I do not want to take up too much more time, because everybody has the right to speak, but let me be clear: closing half of Glasgow’s jobcentres is a cack-handed plan, and it is being done in the most cavalier way. Ripping jobcentres out of the most deprived areas of the country—ripping them from the heart of communities and away from the people who need them most—is tantamount to social and economic vandalism. Glasgow is not the guinea pig of Westminster, so they are not challenging the sanction. They think that they will be able to ride it out, but then they get this week, because the appointment time has been changed. That adds a great deal of uncertainty and stress to the situation, because people are faced with the prospect of being sanctioned for being late. That is a huge fear for people. My experience in my constituency is that policy.

The consultation that Bridgeton CAB has done this morning highlighted that the time, date and frequency of appointments can be changed. The bus that someone regularly takes—one arrives much more than the other. People trying to get there who arrive in a neat 29-minute slot; one arrives much further away and that it will be much harder for them to get there.

The consultation that Bridgeon CAB has done this morning highlighted that the time, date and frequency of appointments can be changed. The bus that someone regularly takes—one arrives much more regularly than the other. People trying to get there who have children to drop off at nursery or to pick up from school will find it much more difficult to fit that into their day.

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**[Natalie McGarry]**

4.44 pm

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am glad to be able to speak in this debate, Mr Hollobone, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for bringing us all together.

The letter that the Minister sent to MPs said that the plans were “right for the city, its customers and our people”, but I see scant evidence from the people I know in Glasgow that the decision would be any of those three things. The decision seems to have been made entirely in isolation by DWP officials, without speaking to anybody else in the city. They have certainly not spoken to stakeholders in Glasgow, Glasgow City Council, which has condemned it, or the Scottish Government, who are not keen on it at all either. They have not spoken to the most important local partner in Bridgeon, Clyde Gateway, which has done a huge amount in the area to reduce the overt claimant count from 39% in 2009 to 28% in 2015. They know that that is due to the huge amount of work it has done in the area to improve the life chances of people in that community, but it has not been consulted.

Clyde Gateway is a linchpin for the community in terms of economic regeneration, and it needs to be part of the process.

In Bridgeon, around the corner from the jobcentre, there is a citizens advice bureau, which does a huge amount of work to support constituents. The credit union is across the road. The Olympia is right there, with its newly refurbished library, which has computers and classes that help to support local constituents. The Glasgow Women’s Library, which helps vulnerable women with literacy and to improve their self-esteem, is around the corner.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that another vulnerable group that we must take into account is disabled people? It is absolutely disgraceful that people with disability will have much further to travel to find jobs. Has any impact assessment been conducted in that regard? The Government have pledged to halve the disability employment gap; surely these plans undermine that policy.

**Alison Thewliss**: I absolutely agree: the plans entirely undermine that ambition. Bridgeon CAB has been collecting evidence for the public consultation—my area is one of the few that will be consulted on—and it is very concerned that people accessing disability advisers will have much further to travel and that it will be much harder for them to get there.

To touch on transport, the Minister has stated that it takes 11 minutes by car to get from Bridgeon to Shettleston, but that entirely ignores the fact that nearly two thirds of households in the most deprived communities of Glasgow do not have access to a car, so they will need to get two buses. The Minister reckoned that it would take people 29 minutes to get there, but the two buses do not arrive in a neat 29-minute slot; one arrives much more regularly than the other. People trying to get there who have children to drop off at nursery or to pick up from school will find it much more difficult to fit that into their day.

The consultation that Bridgeon CAB has done this morning highlighted that the time, date and frequency of appointments can be changed. The bus that someone got last week that worked out okay may not be the one they get this week, because the appointment time has changed. That adds a great deal of uncertainty and stress to the situation, because people are faced with the prospect of being sanctioned for being late. That is a huge fear for people. My experience in my constituency office—this is also the experience of the citizens advice bureau and other agencies in Glasgow—is that people are afraid to challenge even the first sanction. They think that they will be able to ride it out, but then something else happens at another time and they end up losing their benefits for even longer, which has a huge impact on their family income.

The fact that people have very limited means also means that they will be walking from one jobcentre to the other. It could take nearly 50 minutes to go from...
Patrick Grady: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I have three brief points: on how the closure will affect my constituents in Maryhill; on the Government’s interaction, or lack thereof, with the Scottish Government; and on the bigger questions regarding the Department for Work and Pensions estate and the ongoing review of premises.

The latest figures show that in November 2016 the total number of unemployed claimants in Glasgow North was 1,509. The unemployment rate of 4.1% is the 90th highest of the 650 UK constituencies. As my hon. Friends have said, we do not know exactly how many of those people use the Maryhill jobcentre—at least I have not yet been able to find the numbers—and we do not know exactly where they live, because we have not seen the maps or the catchment areas. Along with my colleague Bob Doris, the MSP for Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn, I had the privilege of speaking to a few of them outside the Maryhill jobcentre yesterday morning, and I later met representatives of one-parent families. I, like other Members, encourage the Minister to come to Glasgow to meet some of those people and to hear about it at first hand. The online petition is important, and it is good to see, but nothing beats hearing people’s experiences first hand.

We heard from someone who travels from Acre, at the far end of my constituency, to the relocated jobcentre in Springburn. That is a journey of an hour, and two buses, each way—a total of four buses and two hours’ travel time—at a cost of £4.30 for an all-day ticket, which represents 46% of the daily allowance from their £72.40 weekly jobseeker’s allowance.

Another concern that users raised with us is the impact that the closures will have on the relationship between claimants and their work coaches. A number of the users to whom we spoke had developed positive and constructive relationships with their advisers, who want to help the claimants get back into work. The claimants were concerned that merged centres would mean a less personal service, the risk of a lack of understanding of individual circumstances and, in turn, increased fear of the risk of sanctions in the event of missing or being late for appointments because of, say, childcare responsibilities. Those are not just theoretical concerns; they are what we heard first hand from service users.

The Government’s consultation says:

“The city of Glasgow is split into 4 geographical areas—north, south, east and west.”

Well, that is true of every point on the planet, with the possible exception of the north and south poles. It gives the lie to the idea that a great deal of thought has gone into these consultations, particularly the consultations with stakeholders. I have asked the Minister and his officials on several occasions about the discussions with the Scottish Government, so it would be helpful if he could confirm or admit that he has not met his Scottish Government counterpart, Jamie Hepburn. Has there been any kind of discussion, beyond a formal exchange of letters, since the announcement of the closures?

In his letter of 7 December, Mr Hepburn told the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that the lack of communication has been “wholly contrary to the spirit of the Smith Agreement, and in particular, paragraph 58, which while recognising Jobcentre Plus would remain reserved, calls for our Governments to ‘identify ways to further link services through methods such as co-location wherever possible and establish more formal mechanisms to govern the Jobcentre Plus network in Scotland.’”

It is simply not good enough for the UK Government to keep the Scottish Government out of the loop like that. There is supposed to be a respect agenda between the Governments, as is written into the Edinburgh agreement and the Smith commission. Will the Minister now commit to fully engage with the Scottish Government on these closures and on any other proposals for the DWP estate in Scotland?

There are more questions to be asked about the DWP estate at a different time and in a different situation, but it is interesting that, in the consultation, the DWP admits that it does not own any of the buildings it occupies. Who has the upper hand in the negotiations with the contractors? What happens if the company that owns Caxton House in central London, where the Minister has his office, decides that, actually, it would be much nicer as luxury flats? Where would he go then? Perhaps the DWP can disperse some of its staff from central London to the Maryhill jobcentre.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on another point that was made, without prompting, by one of the people who Bob and I met yesterday. Such decision-making processes increase the distance that people in communities like Glasgow North feel from the Westminster Government. In 2014 we were promised a partnership of equals—a UK that Scotland should lead, not leave. As in so many areas of policy, the UK Government need to live up to that rhetoric. If they do not listen when Scotland speaks, they should not be surprised if people decide that perhaps full control of our jobcentres, and of all the other policies that are currently reserved, would be better coming back to Scotland.
4.58 pm

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for securing this important debate. The last time the Minister and I met, I had lost my voice due to a bad cold. I am not sure whether he will be happy to know that it has returned.

Before I address the impact on my constituency, I express my dismay at how the closures have been handled. After the news broke in the press, it took the Department seven hours to write to us. We were not the only ones left in the dark, though. The Secretary of State for Scotland refused to give me a proper answer when I asked whether he knew of the plans. Even if he had, it would not have made a difference, as demonstrated by his shocking silence on the matter.

The doors of Cambuslang jobcentre are to shut without consultation. I do not think that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions comprehends what that will mean. The jobcentre is my neighbour—it is less than a minute’s walk from my office. On a daily basis, my team and I see how busy the jobcentre can be and how people rely on its services. People are required to actively look for work each day, with most of it done on computers. Some constituents have trouble with that and rely on assistance from jobcentre staff.

Although parts of Cambuslang are prosperous, some areas suffer from pockets of real deprivation. One such area is Halfway, which I have been proud to call home for almost two decades. There is a fantastic local community, but there are also deep-seated problems related to deprivation and poverty. It takes about 30 minutes for a fit person to walk from Halfway to Cambuslang jobcentre. Once that jobcentre closes, the round trip to Rutherglen jobcentre would involve walking for two and a half hours. Public transport links are good, but traffic is sometimes an issue. I have serious concerns about an increase in sanctions once Cambuslang jobcentre closes, particularly for those in Halfway who will be travelling the furthest.

There is also a lack of resource in the area. If someone does not have access to a computer, they might need to use one in the library to look for work. Like many other libraries, the one in Halfway has restricted opening hours—it is not open at all today, for example. There is also an effect on local government services, such as Routes to Work South, which is based in Cambuslang and happens to be the landlord of my constituency office. Will the jobcentre closure create extra strain for which South Lanarkshire Council will be expected to foot the bill?

Those are just some of the issues that the Department has failed to take into account, and I regret not having more time to go into greater depth. I urge Ministers to think again, to stop the plans and to engage in meaningful dialogue with the relevant Members so that they, the Ministers, can fully understand the impact of these cuts. Glasgow may be the first, but which city, town or community in Scotland or the UK will be targeted next? We shall see.

4.58 pm

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak here today, although it is not a
is unique in finding out such things at the eleventh hour. The Government have indicated that they do not plan to consult on the majority of the closures, including Anniesland. That is not good enough. For changes so dramatic, there must be a full public consultation, including an impact assessment. When the Minister comes to Glasgow in January, I hope that he can join me on the bus journey that I took, to see what my constituents will have to do.

5.3 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a privilege, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to represent the Scottish National party and the city of Glasgow on this issue. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who spoke with passion and dedication on behalf of his constituents.

I will address some general issues first. The decision to close offices will result in the poorest communities not being served by a jobcentre, making it even harder for those seeking employment to get support. Last year, one in three children were living in poverty in Glasgow, which has consistently the highest rate in Scotland, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. At 7.7%, Glasgow’s unemployment rate is one of the highest in Scotland, and it suffers high levels of deprivation. By closing offices in its most deprived areas, the Department for Work and Pensions risks reducing access to support for those who need it the most.

The Government cite the fact that claims can be made online, but Citizens Advice Scotland has made it clear that a large proportion of sanctions among its clients arise from problems accessing information technology, often because a claimant does not have the skills or IT access to meet the jobcentre’s requirements. The closures represent 50% of Jobcentre Plus offices in Glasgow, a much larger cut than the anticipated 20% cut to the estate announced in last year’s autumn statement. Tens of thousands of people will now have to travel further and incur additional cost to attend their required appointments.

The Government must be mindful that people travelling to jobcentres to seek work and employment support are doing so on very low incomes. Making them travel further can be financially costly and have health implications for the sick and disabled. Those attending jobcentres will have increased transport costs and travel time, particularly those required to register daily or weekly. Someone who must use a taxi for even three or four miles could have to pay up to £14.70, according to the assessment requires accurate information, not the information in Google Maps, which is inaccurate—for example, it advertises bus services that no longer operate in the city of Glasgow. What advice has the Minister received on the possible outcome of a judicial review for a claimant who goes to a jobcentre earmarked for a closure that has not been publicly consulted on? Will he agree to put all eight closures out for public consultation? The proposal is city-wide and must be consulted on as such.

The full impact of the closures has not been vetted or tested. We believe that the full impact on claimants will be considerable, and it should not be undertaken for commercial reasons. The jobcentre closures are unnecessary and unwanted, and should be halted. The plans are regressive and morally outrageous. It is clear that the Westminster Government intend to make Glasgow a guinea pig, and to use it as a template for further closures across Scotland and the UK. I ask the Minister to give Glasgow an early Christmas present by halting the plans for jobcentre closures in the great city of Glasgow.

5.9 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing this debate on the disgraceful planned closure of half of the jobcentres in Glasgow, which has drawn contributions from so many Members who represent the people of Glasgow. I commend them on their focus and on getting to grips with the detail of the geography and with what the plans mean for those who will be affected.

On 7 December this year, the Department for Work and Pensions announced its proposal to close eight of the 16 jobcentres that serve the city of Glasgow by no later than March 2018. The proposal is part of the “People and Locations” office closure programme, which the then Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), announced in the autumn statement in November 2015. We have no doubt that it is the wrong approach. The reduction in employment support in Glasgow will deepen hardship in many areas of the city.

A recent study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that looked into disconnected communities used Glasgow as an example to demonstrate the increasing scarcity of local employment opportunities, thus reinforcing the
importance of local employment support services with contacts and knowledge of a local area. The study’s report noted the challenging combination of people’s reluctance to leave more geographically isolated neighbourhoods around the city and the withdrawal of the vital transport services that help them to get around. Those realities make having an accessible and well distributed employment support network all the more important and offer only evidence against the Government’s failed austerity approach, as does the higher unemployment rate in Glasgow. According to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics, the unemployment rate in Glasgow as a whole was 7.1%—1.9 percentage points higher than the UK rate of 5.2%, and 1.6 percentage points higher than the overall rate in Scotland of 5.5%. The latest claimant count shows 5,810 people registered as unemployed at the jobcentres threatened with closure.

The Government’s plans are shameful—they are nothing more than the continuation of the Tories’ failed austerity agenda. There is no evidence to suggest that they will enhance the support on offer; indeed, they will diminish what is available, while ramping up pressure on employment service staff in other offices and on claimants. The demands on staff have already increased significantly as a result of changes such as weekly signing for new claimants in the first 13 weeks of their claim, changes to single parent conditionality, the roll-out of universal credit and the reduction of more than 6,200 in the overall number of work coaches between 2011-12 and 2015-16—a cut of 35%. The pressures on staff are likely to increase further with the introduction of in-work conditionality under universal credit; the remaining jobcentres in Glasgow will have to deal with twice the volume of claimants. That is a particular concern for the Shettleston jobcentre, which will be taking on the case-load from three of the jobcentres that are closing.

What assessment has the Department made of the impact of the closures on travel times for claimants and associated additional costs? What breakdown can the Department provide us with of the expected increase in case loads for the jobcentres that will remain open? Can the Minister guarantee that the 236 staff who work in the eight jobcentres that are due to close will be offered posts in the remaining jobcentres? What about travel time for claimants? How accessible will the remaining jobcentres be? The DWP does not appear to know, although I understand that, as a number of hon. Members have mentioned, it has been using Google Maps to try to check. The DWP work services director for Scotland apparently told Radio Scotland:

“We’re not clear yet how many of our customers will have extra travel costs. That’s part of the consultation.”

Three of the jobcentres earmarked for closure fall outside the criterion of 15 to 20 minutes’ travel time to the nearest jobcentre, so the DWP has to carry out a public consultation. The consultation document, which was put online only yesterday, gives the shortest journey time by public transport as 30 minutes from Bridgeton to Shettleston and from Maryhill to Springburn, and 45 minutes from Castlemilk to Newlands. A return trip with First Bus in Glasgow costs £3.75, while an all-day ticket costs £4.50. That is a major slice out of the jobseeker’s allowance of £73.10 a week for someone over 25, and an even bigger slice from the £57.90 that a young person aged 18 to 25 receives. First Bus does offer discounted bus fares for claimants, but only after the first 13 weeks for JSA claimants, during which, somewhat ironically, they will be signing on weekly.

When will the Minister publish the impact of these proposals on equality issues? We are particularly concerned about the impact on women, children and disabled people. In 2015 the Government set a target to halve the disability employment gap by 2020; how can that be squared with increasing the distances that disabled people need to travel to get employment support?

It seems that once again the Tories are pushing ahead with their failing austerity agenda, which flies in the face of evidence, thought or reason. Clearly the Government still have no plan. Instead, they are asking the most vulnerable to pay for their economic mismanagement. We stand against these poorly thought out proposals, and we hope that the Government finally see sense and scrap them.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): May I ask the Minister to conclude his remarks no later than 5.27 pm?

5.14 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing this debate. I also congratulate his colleagues who contributed: the hon. Members for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry), for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier)—I am glad that she has her voice back—and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who not only represents his Glasgow constituency but speaks for the Scottish National party from the Front Bench.

The Department for Work and Pensions delivers critical services and support to tens of thousands of customers across Scotland, England, and Wales every day, and our network of jobcentres is at the very heart of that. In all our constituencies, jobcentre staff are hard at work helping people to access the support they need and move into employment. As society has changed, so have our jobcentres. We have moved a long way from the caricature of jobcentres and the welfare system that was presented 20 years ago in films such as “The Full Monty” and “Trainspotting”.

Reforms such as universal credit are revolutionising the relationship between claimants and work coaches, ensuring that the support we offer is more personalised and better suited to claimants’ needs. That includes enabling claimants to access our services in ways that suit them. At the heart of reforms such as universal credit is a digitally focused approach that is more secure, more accessible and more efficient. The claimant count has dropped from almost 1.5 million in 2010 to around 800,000 now.

The background to this set of changes to the DWP jobcentre estate is that after 20 years, the private finance initiative contract that covers many DWP offices is nearing an end: it will expire at the end of March 2018.

That provides us with an opportunity to review which offices we will need in the future, saving the taxpayer money while ensuring that our clients are able to access the support they need. When considering that question,
our overriding priority has been the future services we will offer our claimants. In every case, we have sought to minimise disruption, moving existing jobcentres into nearby sites and co-locating with other services wherever possible.

The UK labour market is in the strongest position it has been in for years, but we cannot predict the exact path that it will take in the future. I reassure hon. Members that these changes will continue to ensure that we retain sufficient flexibility and spare capacity in the system. Let me be clear: our aim is to reduce floor space, not to reduce the workforce who are so important in supporting claimants back into work. Staff and services in jobcentres that are being closed are being transferred into nearby sites. In answer to the question asked by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), there are no planned job losses among jobcentre staff as a result of these closures.

When a jobcentre closes, the Department will consider what outreach services we can expand and what facilities may be suitable. The Department supports outreach activity at community and partner facilities right across the country, which allows our work coaches and partner organisations to support the shared needs of claimants. By working with a range of partners, including local authorities, we are able to expand the range and offer of our services. In Glasgow we work closely with organisations such as Anniesland College to offer such services, including helping claimants with their job search and offering benefit advice.

Chris Stephens: The Minister mentioned co-location and working with public sector partners. Now that we know that there was some discussion with Glasgow City Council about the Anniesland site, will he tell us whether there were any discussions with the council about the other seven sites earmarked for closure?

Damian Hinds: Through the course of this process, there have been many, many discussions about many, many potential options and permutations of site movements, co-locations and different sorts of arrangements. As we enter the consultation period, there is a further opportunity to talk about outreach facilities; no doubt some of those discussions will include consideration of local authority-run premises and so on. The process involves having lots of discussions about lots of potential ways of organising things.

For those claimants who are unable to attend a jobcentre because of their vulnerability, or because of the complexity of the transaction required with the Department, we have in place robust procedures. DWP Visiting undertakes home visits, or occasionally visits at an alternative agreed address, if appropriate. Travel expenses are refundable in certain circumstances, including when claimants are required to attend a jobcentre more frequently than every two weeks.

Dr Cameron: Will impact assessments be undertaken for people in the affected constituencies who have disabilities and may not be able to travel the further distance to the new jobcentre locations?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady asked about that in an earlier intervention, and I was coming on to address it, but as she has asked again I will answer now. Yes of course the consultation will consider the entire client population, including the particular needs and requirements of people with disabilities.

In certain circumstances, claimants are able to maintain their claim by post, including if they live more than an hour from the jobcentre, door to door, by public transport—I should say that right now I am speaking not specifically about Glasgow but about the general arrangements—or if they have caring responsibilities for a child and it is not possible for them to make arrangements for short-term childcare. Claimants can also choose to attend an alternative jobcentre to the one allocated to them if the one they have been allocated is not the easiest or least costly to attend.

Our jobcentres in the quarters of Glasgow have built up over time, primarily within large housing estates. If we look at employment trends, we can see that the claimant count in Glasgow has fallen from 24,200 in 2010 to around 13,500 today. The hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned unemployment statistics from her constituency; she will know that the claimant count in Glasgow East is down 47% since 2010. As the count has dropped across the city, so has the use of some of the smaller jobcentres. In some cases, the change has been so dramatic that we are now using only 25% of the space we are paying for under the Private Finance Initiative contract that was agreed by the then Government back in 1998.

Our proposals seek to bring the smaller jobcentres together into larger existing sites in the same area, thereby reducing our rents and freeing up funding for our services while still ensuring that our claimants are able to access them. The reduction in sites in Glasgow is in line with our spending review 2015 announcement that we would reduce our overall estate by some 20%. The number of jobcentres proposed for closure reflects the prevalence of smaller jobcentres in Glasgow and the large amount of space we are underusing in the city. It does not reflect a cut in our investment. In fact, between April and September 2016, we recruited 122 additional work coaches in Scotland. That number is set to increase further over the coming months.

When deciding what changes to make, we have carefully considered the impact on our claimants, including travel times, about which several hon. Members asked. We feel that asking someone to attend a new jobcentre which is either less than three miles or less than 20 minutes by public transport away from their existing jobcentre is a reasonable ask. Many claimants already travel much further than that, as do many people in work to get to their place of work. There are three proposed closures in Glasgow that are outside those criteria: in Bridgeton, Castlemilk and Maryhill. In such cases, it is crucial that we fully understand the implications for our claimants before any changes are made, which is why we are holding a public consultation—as we do for all similar cases throughout the country—to seek the views of elected representatives, local authorities and community bodies.

Chris Stephens: The Minister mentioned co-location and working with public sector partners. Now that we know that there was some discussion with Glasgow City Council about the Anniesland site, will he tell us whether there were any discussions with the council about the other seven sites earmarked for closure?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Member asked about that in an earlier intervention, and I was coming on to address it, but as she has asked again I will answer now. Yes of
[Damian Hinds]

Having heard the specific concerns raised by hon. Members present in the meeting we held a few days ago, I have decided to put the specific consultations we are discussing online. They were uploaded to the gov.uk website yesterday and will now run for an extended period, up until the end of January 2017. As I said, I recently had that opportunity to discuss matters with hon. Members directly, and I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate. A number of points came up in the debate; I am not sure I will get through them all, but I shall try to get through as many as possible.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North spoke of worries that the changes may affect the positive relationships—I was encouraged that he called them that—between claimants and work coaches. I reassure him that one of the important things we are doing is to change the work-coach model to one where they have a mixed case load and can maintain contact with a client, even if the benefit they are on or their circumstances change. Making those relationships richer and longer lasting is absolutely with the grain of what we are trying to do.

The hon. Members for Glasgow East and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West mentioned having heard about this announcement through the press—we had an opportunity to speak about that last Thursday. I am sure that hon. Members understand that we are unable to share details to speak about that last Thursday. I am sure that hon. Members present in the meeting we held a few days ago, [Damian Hinds]

I regret that I am out of time. The rationale for the proposals is clear: we have seen a sharp fall in claimant counts in the city of Glasgow. There are no planned job losses for the jobcentre network in the city, which is important. We will continue to offer the full complement of support to help claimants back to work, and we have a clear set of outreach and support measures to be consulted on.

5.27 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I thank you, Mr Hollobone, and I thank my hon. Friends for their contributions to the debate. I wish to say one or two things to close.

The Minister referred to the fact that the claimant count in Glasgow is down and so is use of floor space. In my constituency, the Government want to close Castlemilk jobcentre, but it is in a town that was once larger than the entire city of Perth. That gives an idea of the geographical and population size of the community that that jobcentre serves. The Minister also wants to close the jobcentre in Langside in my constituency, although it serves the second most densely populated local authority ward anywhere in the country of Scotland. That gives an idea of what is meant by the small, out-of-town jobcentres that the Government are seeking to close.

Only this Government could ask people in a consultation about travelling for more than 20 minutes when they themselves deem that to be unreasonable. The Minister said that the Government think 20 minutes is a reasonable ask, so they do not consult on that, but they do consult when travelling for more than 20 minutes is involved, in spite of the fact that they think that is an unreasonable proposal in the first place. The Minister is all over the shop.

We heard about the situation in Anniesland, where the Department must have known as far back as February last year that not only had discussion taken place, but planning permission had been granted. A formal, legal process had been gone through. Staff were not told, and neither were Members. The Minister picked this fight—we will pick it up after the Christmas recess.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered closure of jobcentres in Glasgow.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I wish everyone a merry Christmas.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
EU Energy Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): The Energy Council is taking place in Brussels on 5 December. I will be representing the UK, and below are the agenda items to be discussed.

The Council will hold a policy debate on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning measures to safeguard the security of gas supply and repealing regulation (EU) No 994/2010. This will focus on possible alternative approaches for regional co-operation, exchange of information on commercial contracts and solidarity. The Council will consider the structure of core regions or groups of countries working together to address specific risks.

The debate will also cover the role of competent authorities and the Commission in accessing contract information on security of supply issues and whether a solidarity mechanism should be harmonised or reflect member state specificities.

The Commission introduced the “winter package” on 30 November. As expected this is comprised of legislative proposals for the update of the energy efficiency, energy performance of buildings and renewable energy directives together with new legislative proposals on electricity market design and governance of the energy union.

The Commission will update the Council on progress on developing the external dimension of the EU energy policy. This will be followed by an exchange of views on whether progress has been made on strengthening the common voice of the EU in relations with partners beyond its borders; which countries or regions are the most relevant for the EU; and the tools to be used to enhance mutual cooperation. It will also cover how the EU should best approach the ongoing transformation of the global energy system, and respond to reform processes within international energy organisations.

The presidency will provide an update on the “state of play” on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council, setting a framework for energy efficiency labelling. This will focus on the delays in the trilogue negotiations between European Parliament, Council and the Commission.

The presidency will also provide a short “state of play” update on the proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing an information exchange mechanism with regard to intergovernmental agreements and non-binding instruments between member states and third countries in the field of energy.

The Commission will update the Council on recent developments in the field of external energy relations.

Finally, Malta will inform the Council of the priorities for their presidency in the first half of 2017.

Written Statements
Monday 5 December 2016

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

CABINET OFFICE

Public Service Ombudsman Bill

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): I am pleased today to publish the draft Public Service Ombudsman Bill.

The draft Bill sets out the Government’s plans for a new public service ombudsman. The Government want to make it as simple as possible for everyone to pursue a complaint about public services. The measures in this draft Bill will ensure that anyone who makes a justified complaint can expect a rapid, effective remedy and that their voice will be heard. The new body will provide simpler access to individuals who believe they have suffered injustice or hardship and to share the learning from failures to improve services for everyone.

The draft Bill would abolish the present parliamentary and health service ombudsman and the local government ombudsman and create a new organisation with strengthened governance and accountability. It would improve access to the ombudsman’s services by allowing for all complaints to be made with or without the help of a representative and in a variety of formats to meet the digital age. The draft Bill provides powers designed to allow the new ombudsman to work more effectively including an explicit role in championing improvements in complaints handling.

I am grateful for the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee for their work in championing an improved ombudsman service. I look forward to Parliament and the public’s consideration of our proposals.

TREASURY

Finance Bill 2017 (Draft Clauses)

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): The Government have consulted on a number of tax policies following announcements made at Budget 2016 and previously.

Today, the Government are publishing draft clauses for Finance Bill 2017, along with associated responses to consultations. This fulfils our objective to consult, where possible, on draft clauses for the Finance Bill at least three months in advance of the introduction of the Bill.

The Government will publish draft legislation for the following measures in January 2017:
- Making Tax Digital
- Social Investment Tax Relief
- Clarification of tax treatment for partnerships
- The remaining draft legislation for tax deductibility of corporate interest expense and loss relief reform will also be published in January 2017.

Further detail on the clauses published today can be found in the overview of legislation in draft, which includes corresponding tax information and impact notes. All publications will be available on the gov.uk website.
HOME DEPARTMENT

Hillsborough: Operation Resolve

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Following the decision of Assistant Commissioner Jon Stoddart OBE to stand down as head of Operation Resolve on 5 September 2016, I am pleased to inform Parliament that I have appointed Assistant Commissioner Rob Beckley QPM as the head of Operation Resolve.

Operation Resolve, established in December 2012, is examining the full circumstances surrounding the planning and preparation for and the events on the day of the FA cup semi-final on 15 April 1989 at Hillsborough, Sheffield when 96 Liverpool football club supporters died. It is an IPCC managed investigation, its terms of reference can be found at:

Rob Beckley has been appointed to the Metropolitan police as Assistant Commissioner to carry out the investigation. Most recently he was chief operating officer, College of Policing, retiring on 30 March 2016, having previously served in the Metropolitan Police Service, Thames Valley, Hertfordshire constabulary and Avon and Somerset police, where he was deputy chief constable.

POLICE LEADERSHIP

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am pleased to inform Parliament that Her Majesty the Queen has approved a two-year extension to the appointment of Craig Mackey QPM, Deputy Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

I recommended this extension to Her Majesty having had regard to a recommendation from the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis and a representation from the Mayor of London as occupant of the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime.

My recommendation recognises the important contribution the deputy commissioner has made both nationally and to the Metropolitan Police Service as it has been undergoing a period of transformation.

The extension to 22 January 2019 provides stability for the Metropolitan Police Service and enables the deputy commissioner to continue to play a vital role in cutting crime and keeping Londoners safe.

[HCWS318]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Opportunity and Integration

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Dame Louise Casey has today released her report on how to boost opportunity and integration in isolated communities. A copy of the report has been placed in the Library of the House, and it is also available through my Department’s website.

Dame Louise was commissioned to carry out her review by the then Prime Minister in July 2015. The review conducted through a combination of written consultation, visits and engagement across the country with members of the public and statutory agencies, round tables with academics, faith leaders and analysis of research and data. I am most grateful to Dame Louise for the thoroughness of her review and the comprehensive report.
This country has long been home to many different cultures and communities, but all of us have to be part of one British society. It is right that we celebrate the positive contribution that diverse groups make to British life, but we also need to recognise that more needs to be done to make sure nobody is excluded or left behind. To do that, we need to take a serious look at the evidence and must not shy away from the challenges we face. Dame Louise’s report is a crucial step in that process, and I will be studying her findings very closely.

The report considers population change, patterns of residential and school segregation, social interactions between different groups in society, public attitudes and values, social and economic exclusion, equality impacts of cultural and religious practices, hate and extremism, past approaches and the role of leadership. It concludes with a series of recommendations to Government for promoting integration that could be implemented as a new programme across Government.

I will carefully consider the findings in this review, in consultation with my Government colleagues and faith and community leaders, and will bring forward proposals in due course.

[HCWS319]
The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Competitiveness Council met recently in Brussels. Baroness Neville-Rolfe represented the UK at the Council on 28 November (internal market) and I represented the UK on 29 November (research).

Day One

The Council on day one had a full agenda with key decisions concluded on geo-blocking, the single market strategy and the unified patent court.

The internal market day of the Council began with the approval of legislative and non-legislative A items. On the approval of the EU annual budget the UK abstained.

The first agenda item was a discussion on geo-blocking introduced by Commission Vice-President Andrus Ansip. Following a discussion, member states, including the UK, accepted the text of the proposed regulation and the Council agreed a general approach.

The next item was a debate on the single market strategy and start-up initiative introduced by the Commissioner for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs Elzbieta Bienkowska. The UK intervened to strongly support the single market strategy and welcomed, alongside a number of member states, an Irish-sponsored like-minded letter calling for greater ambition on services—which we had also signed. A number of member states welcomed the Commission’s work on start-up and scale-up, highlighting in particular problems around access to finance.

In a change to the order of proceedings the Council then took two further items before lunch. Firstly, Commissioner Bienkowska presented the annual report on the work of the SME envoy network. She reported the work had been particularly useful in preparing for the Commission’s start-up and scale-up initiative published the previous week. The Council took note of the report.

The presidency then highlighted the outcome of a conference on the collaborative economy following the debate on the collaborative economy at the previous Competitiveness Council in September. Commissioner Bienkowska said the Commission was now considering various issues where national law might conflict with its recent guidance and might issue a series of pilot letters in the near future.

Over lunch, Ministers were joined by the President of the European Automobile Manufacturers’ Association (ACEA), Dieter Zetsche. Commissioners Bienkowska and Oettinger led a wide-ranging discussion on the future of the automotive industry. The UK highlighted the work being undertaken in the UK by the centre for connected and autonomous vehicles, and outlined the planned investment of £100 million which was announced by the Chancellor in the autumn statement.

The next agenda item concerned a discussion of the significance of industrial policy in the Commission’s work programme in 2017. Several member states called on the Commission to demonstrate support for European industry by producing a communication on an EU industrial strategy in 2017. The UK highlighted the importance of delivering the actions in the single market and digital single market strategies, and set out the approach being taken to deliver the UK’s own industrial strategy.

The Commission then introduced CPST check-up on skills. Member states largely agreed with the Commission on the challenges, in particular on digital skills.

The next item was a discussion on the unitary patent and unified patent court (UPC). The UK confirmed its intent to proceed with ratification, and anticipated this being completed according to the existing preparatory timetable. The UK was clear that this decision did not pre-empt our objectives in the forthcoming negotiations and is without prejudice to the UKs future position on the jurisdiction of the CJEU once we have left the EU. This news was welcomed by Commissioner Bienkowska and several member states, who all emphasised the importance of having the UK in the UPC and bringing the court into force as soon as possible in the first half of 2017.

The presidency then presented the state of play of the proposal to improve the type approval and market surveillance of motor vehicles. Commissioner Bienkowska said that further progress had not been made, despite the political commitments following the controversies around Volkswagen last year. The UK intervened to support the Commission and to push for a greater level of ambition from the Council.

The next item was a discussion on proposed regulation of consumer protection laws. The presidency highlighted the substantial work that had been undertaken on this file, and reiterated its aim to reach a negotiating mandate as soon as possible. The Commissioner for Justice Consumers and Gender equality Vera Jourová supported the presidency in seeking to reach a mandate. The UK intervened to stress that this was an important and complex file which needed to return to Competitiveness Council under the Maltese presidency for a political discussion.

The next item was a presentation of the Commission’s notice on the biotechnological directive introduced by Commissioner Bienkowska. The notice aimed to clarify the relationship between patents and plant breeders’ rights. The UK did not intervene.

Commissioner Oettinger opened a discussion of the Commission’s proposals for reforming EU copyright laws. The Commissioner explained the need to provide a modernised copyright framework for the digital age, reflecting the changes to storage, distribution and consumption of content in recent years. The UK welcomes efforts to modernise the EU copyright framework and is consulting with interested stakeholders.

The Hungarian delegation then presented information on the competitiveness aspects of the European pillar of social rights. The Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility Marianne Thyssen noted that balanced economic growth was necessary for social progress. Some member states intervened to emphasise that the pillar should not be legally binding on member states.
The Council concluded with a presentation by the Maltese on priorities for their upcoming presidency. In relation to the Competitiveness Council, these priorities primarily concern the deepening of the single market and making progress on the digital single market.

**Day Two**

Day two began with a debate on the Commission’s recently published space strategy for Europe. The Commission is aiming for this to be broad and inclusive, reaffirming Europe’s place as a global space power. All member states welcomed the EU’s strategy. It is a good fit to UK priorities for growing the space sector.

A number of space issues were raised in the discussion. The Ariane 6 programme was highlighted as important, with some member states reminding the Commission of the need for cost-effectiveness to avoid unreasonable cost increases. It was felt important that the EU-ESA relationship takes advantage of their respective competences. There was also a call to assist those member states who currently have limited engagement with the sector.

The UK intervened to welcome the space strategy, recognising that EU systems could be used for defence and security objectives, but they had to remain civil systems under civilian control. The UK also highlighted the opportunities to our commercial sectors, and that space weather and the security of space systems were risk areas that needed to be properly understood.

Council conclusions on early-stage researchers were adopted without amendment.

The last substantive agenda item was the Commission’s report on the implementation of the strategy for international co-operation in research and innovation. The discussion highlighted examples of the benefits of international co-operation. The UK stressed three key points—the need for EU research funding to remain focused on excellence and open to the world; that the UK would continue to collaborate with the Commission on science diplomacy in countries where relations were strained; and third, called for the Commission to ensure that the rules were updated to address problems which had led to a reduction in third country participation—e.g. liability clauses. This message was echoed by several member states.

A number of member states were supportive of PRIMA, a €400 million programme that seeks to promote food security and water supply in the Mediterranean and is a priority for the incoming Maltese presidency. Bonus 2, a programme on marine research, was also raised as a positive example of potential multilateral collaboration over shared challenges.

For AOB items, the Commission discussed the launch of an open science policy platform, which will look at best practice, develop EU-wide guidelines for open science delivery and promote open science. This work may inform how the “open science” agenda is implemented in the FP9 programme—the successor to Horizon 2020. Many member states were supportive.

Next, the Commission gave an overview of their proposed €1 billion funding programme for quantum technologies. This was followed by an announcement that the “Accelerating Clean Energy” communication will be published on 1 December.

Finally, the Commission welcomed the Portuguese delegation’s presentation on developing an infrastructure to promote north-south Atlantic research collaboration.

The meeting concluded with a presentation from the upcoming Maltese presidency on its priorities in research—including the PRIMA initiative.

**TREASURY**

**ECOFIN: 6 December 2016**

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):**

A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 6 December 2016. EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following items:

**Early morning session**

Ministers will be briefed on the outcomes of the 5 December meeting of the Eurogroup and the Commission will present an update on the current economic situation.

**Investment plan for Europe**

Ministers will discuss proposals for the investment plan for Europe and be asked to reach a general approach on the Commission’s proposal to amend the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) legislation as part of the planned extension beyond its original 2015-18 lifetime. Ministers will also discuss draft Council conclusions on measures to tackle bottlenecks to investment identified under the third pillar of the investment plan for Europe.

**Anti-tax avoidance directive 2**

Ministers will be asked to agree a general approach to the EU Commission’s proposals on the anti-tax avoidance directive (ATAD2).

**Enhanced co-operation in the area of financial transaction tax**

Ministers will receive an update on the proposal for a council directive implementing enhanced co-operation in the area of financial transaction tax.

**Banking union: risk reduction measures**

The Council presidency will present its new proposals, published on November 23, to revise the capital and resolution frameworks for banks and large investment firms, which will be followed by an exchange of views.

**Anti-money laundering directive**

The Council presidency will provide an update on the discussions for proposal for a directive on the prevention of the use of the financial system for the purposes of money laundering or terrorist financing.

**Current financial service legislative proposals**

The Council presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

**VAT digital package**

The Commission will present on the digital single market VAT package.

**Deepening the economic and monetary union: follow-up on the 5 Presidents’ report**

The Commission will provide information on the 5 Presidents’ report.

[HCWS321]
Improving the predictability and transparency of the stability and growth pact

Minister will endorse draft Council conclusions on improving the predictability and transparency of the stability and growth pact.

Report on strategic issues in the area of customs by the high level group of customs directors general

Ministers will be informed about the outcome of the pilot meeting of the high level group of directors general for customs policy, taxation and customs co-operation on 25 October 2016.

European semester 2017

The Commission will present to Ministers on the publication of the 2017 annual growth survey (AGS) and alert mechanism report (AMR), followed by an exchange of views.

Implementation of the banking union

Ministers discussed the current state of play regarding implementation of banking union within the eurozone.

Fight against the financing of terrorism

The Commission will give a presentation on the fight against the financing of terrorism.

Capital markets union

The Commission will provide information on the capital markets union.

[HCWS325]

DEFENCE

Chemical Weapons Convention: Protective Programme

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning):
My right hon. Friend the Minister of State in the House of Lords (Earl Howe) has made the following written statement:

The UK’s chemical protection programme is designed to protect against the use of chemical weapons. Such a programme is permitted by the chemical weapons convention, with which the United Kingdom is fully compliant. Under the terms of the convention, we are required to provide information annually to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. In accordance with the Government’s commitment to openness, a copy of the summary that has been provided to the organisation outlining the UK’s chemical protection programme in 2015 has been placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS323]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Security Situation: Northern Ireland

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): This is the 10th statement on the security situation in Northern Ireland and my first statement to Parliament as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. It covers the threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism, rather than from international terrorism, which Members will be aware is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department, who updates the House separately.

In the six months since my predecessor’s last statement, the same small number of dissident republican terrorist groupings have continued their campaign of violence. Their support remains limited, despite their attempts to seek legitimacy in a wider society which continues to reject their use of violence. Dissident republican terrorists reject the peace process and the progress and benefits which it has brought to Northern Ireland.

The terrorist threat level in Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland-related terrorism remains unchanged at severe (an attack is highly likely). Most people are not affected by this threat, but where terrorism, paramilitary-style attacks and community attacks endure, so too will our efforts to tackle them. There will be no let-up in our efforts to ensure that terrorism never succeeds.

In Northern Ireland, these terrorists have targeted the brave people who serve the community day in, day out, including the police, prison officers and the military. Dissident republicans are relatively small, disparate and factional groupings, but they are also determined and have lethal intent. The last statement to this House highlighted the tragic death of prison officer Adrian Ismay, who was attacked and killed by dissident republicans. These attacks often also have potential to injure members of the public who live and work alongside the intended victims. There have been three further attempted attacks on security personnel since then in which, thankfully, no one was seriously injured.

Our strategic response

PSNI and MI5 are unstinting in their work to counter the threat of violence. Numerous dissident republican attacks have been prevented, often through vital support provided by members of the community. Since my predecessor last reported, PSNI has recovered a large amount of terrorist matériel in Northern Ireland including firearms, high explosives, chemicals and a range of improvised explosive devices. Continued close working with security partners in Ireland has resulted in further significant disruptions and I pay tribute to An Garda Síochána who have diligently pursued terrorists in Ireland with impressive effect. We are all safer for their efforts and because of the strong cross-border working relationship that exists on all security matters.

Similar joint working between PSNI and police in Great Britain led to the arrest and charge of an individual, living in Great Britain, with offences connected to dissident republican terrorism. This enabled the recovery of a significant amount of terrorist matériel in England linked to Northern Ireland-related terrorism. Legal proceedings are now under way. So far in Northern Ireland this year, there have been 103 arrests, 17 individuals charged under the Terrorism Act and five recent convictions linked to terrorist activity. There have been four national security attacks in comparison to 16 attacks in 2015 and 40 in 2010. Although there has been a reduction in the overall number of national security incidents so far this year, terrorist attack planning continues with lethal intent and capability as the murder of Adrian Ismay underlines. Vigilance in the face of this continuing threat remains essential.

This Government’s commitment to tackling Northern Ireland-related terrorism remains a high priority. This is supported through the provision of £160 million in this Parliament, of additional security funding to the Police Service of Northern Ireland to tackle the severe and
We aim to have the IRC established by early 2017.

Great Britain threat level

The threat level to Great Britain from Northern Ireland-related terrorism was raised in May to substantial (an attack is a strong possibility). Although dissident republicans are overwhelmingly focused on carrying out attacks in Northern Ireland, there remains a need to be alert, aware and vigilant.

Paramilitary activity

Paramilitary activity continues to undermine communities in Northern Ireland. Both republican and loyalist paramilitary organisations carry out violent criminal attacks against people in their own communities. So far this year there have been six paramilitary-related deaths, 17 casualties of paramilitary-style shootings and 57 casualties of paramilitary-style assaults. These acts are cowardly, unjustified and damage communities. It is this Government’s clear view that paramilitary activity was never justified in the past and cannot be justified today.

Tackling paramilitary activity

This Government are strongly supporting efforts to tackle paramilitarism and organised crime in Northern Ireland. PSNI invests significant resources into both the prevention and investigation of paramilitary activity and we have pledged £25 million of funding through the Fresh Start agreement to help ensure that the relevant agencies are appropriately resourced to fulfil that commitment. Tackling paramilitary activity is an important step in terms of delivering Fresh Start agreement commitments and provides an opportunity to make a real difference to people’s lives.

The Northern Ireland Executive published an action plan on tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime in July 2016. This follows the paramilitary panel’s recommendations which provide for a strategic approach to the disbandment of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, including improving criminal justice outcomes in terrorist cases. The Government are working closely with the Northern Ireland Executive to promote progress towards ending paramilitary activity through a range of measures and securing faster and more effective outcomes in terrorism cases.

A joint agency taskforce, established under the Fresh Start agreement to enhance law enforcement co-operation, aimed at tackling organised crime and criminality including that linked to paramilitarism, brings together the expertise of law enforcement agencies involved in tackling organised crime gangs who seek to exploit the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. UK and Irish Governments’ Ministers have recently held positive talks to discuss co-operation between the An Garda Síochána and the PSNI in relation to the progress made by the joint agency taskforce.

The Independent Reporting Commission will be charged with reporting on progress towards ending paramilitary activity, including on implementation of measures taken by the UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government. The treaty between the UK Government and the Irish Government, formally establishing the IRC, was signed on 13 September 2016. We aim to have the IRC established by early 2017.

Conclusion

The severe level of threat from violent dissident republicans remains. Good progress has been made but there are still those who wish to attack police, prison and military officers, and some of Northern Ireland’s communities live under the constant threat of paramilitarism. Through the excellent work of PSNI, MI5 and security partners including An Garda Síochána, we will continue to bring those who would damage our society to justice, and protect our infrastructure and people from harm. I would like to thank them for their service to the people of Northern Ireland. There never has been, and there never will be any place for terrorism or paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland. We must all play our part in ensuring that Northern Ireland continues to flourish, free of any such pernicious activity.

TRANSPORT

Rail Update

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

Britain’s railways are crucial to our economic future, and we have seen significant growth in passenger numbers in the 20 years since privatisation. This growth brings challenges, and the impact of disruption can be immediate, significant and wide-ranging.

Our railways need to adapt and change in order to be able to cope with the growth that they have already experienced, and that which lies ahead. We are spending huge amounts trying to tackle the challenge—with new and longer trains and more capacity being introduced across the country. The Shaw report made a series of recommendations for change, including that Network Rail devolve responsibility to the route level. I support the principles of the Shaw report, and I support Network Rail’s reform programme, but there is much more to do.

I intend to press ahead with a recommendation put to the Department five years ago by Sir Roy McNulty, when he reported to Philip Hammond on how to make the railways run better and more cost-effectively. I will do this initially at an operational level. In order for all those involved to be incentivised to deliver the best possible service for the passenger, I expect the new franchises—starting with South Eastern and East Midlands—to have integrated operating teams between train services and infrastructure. I will also be inviting Transport for London (TfL) to be more closely involved in developing the next South Eastern franchise, through seconding a TfL representative to the franchise specification team.

We will continue to develop the model for greater alignment of track and train as further franchises are renewed—including the option of joint ventures. In the meantime, my Department is also publishing an update to the rail franchising schedule which I am placing in the Libraries of both Houses.

I also want to bring new skills into the challenge of upgrading our railways. I will begin by looking at the reopening of the link from Oxford to Cambridge, to support a range of opportunities including housing, science, technology and innovation. I am going to establish East West Rail as a new and separate organisation, to accelerate the permissions needed to reopen the route,
and to secure private sector involvement to design, build and operate the route as an integrated organisation. This East West Rail organisation will be established early in the new year and chaired by the former Chief Executive of Chiltern Rail, Rob Brighouse.

Along with reform of the investment planning process to take better account of the needs of passengers and freight shippers, and extensive work across the industry to improve skills and diversity, these reforms will set the railway on a firmer footing for the future. We can and we will make sure our rail network plays its part in making this a country that works for everyone. I will bring forward a new strategy for rail in due course which will provide greater detail on our plans.

[HCWS322]
Written Statements

Wednesday 7 December 2016

CABINET OFFICE

National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Today, I am pleased to announce the publication of the 2016 annual report of the national security strategy and strategic defence and security review (SDSR). I have placed a copy in the House of Commons Library.

The 2015 national security strategy and SDSR set out our vision of a secure and prosperous United Kingdom with global reach and influence. We identified the values our vision of a secure and prosperous United Kingdom strategy and strategic defence and security review (SDSR) is based on. We identified the values we hold dear: national ambition; protect our people; project our global influence; and promote our prosperity. In support of each of these objectives, we committed to specific actions and changes, on which we have instigated a cross-government programme of activity, overseen by a new sub-committee of the National Security Council (NSC).

In the SDSR, we committed to giving Parliament an annual update on implementation of the strategy. This first annual report on the SDSR sets out our progress in delivering on our commitments and shows how the strategy is already helping the United Kingdom face up to the threats and challenges posed by a changing world.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister says in her foreword to the annual report, much has changed since the national security strategy and strategic defence and security review was published in November of last year—not least the United Kingdom’s historic decision to leave the European Union. But the principal threats to our national security remain the same. We are witnessing the resurgence of state-based threats—as displayed most obviously by Russia’s actions in Syria and Ukraine; terrorism and extremism threaten our security; cyber-attacks are on the increase from both state and non-state actors, and we face renewed challenges to the rules-based international order that provides the bedrock of our security. Some of the great global challenges of our time, such as the phenomenon of mass migration, have become more pronounced in the last 12 months.

We should be confident of the United Kingdom’s ability to rise to these challenges, drawing on our great strengths as a nation, and the relevance and strength of our national security strategy.

The decision to leave the EU carries significant implications for the UK in many areas of political and economic engagement. In the national security context, however, the threats and challenges to UK national security have not fundamentally changed as a result of the decision to leave. The UK remains fully and strongly committed to Europe’s defence and security and we continue to play an active role in security and defence co-operation across Europe. As we leave the European Union, we will be more prominent than ever: an outward-facing, global partner at the heart of international efforts to secure peace and prosperity for all our people.

In the SDSR, we made 89 principal commitments. We have completed 12, and set in train 38 more which will be ongoing throughout this Parliament. The SDSR pledged to deliver a number of complex major projects and programmes, some with a delivery timescale of a decade or more; progress on these is as we would expect at this early stage.

Britain continues to lead the way in responding to global challenges that affect our security and prosperity. The UK is the only country in the G20 to meet both the NATO target of 2% of GDP on defence spending, and 0.7% of GNI on overseas development assistance. British leadership on defence and security issues is supported and reinforced by the strength of our economy and our unique international influence and soft power, enabling us to work with our allies and partners around the world to deliver our national security strategy.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Neighbourhood Planning Bill: English Votes for English Laws

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): I am pleased to announce the publication of analysis of English votes for English laws in relation to Government amendments to the Neighbourhood Planning Bill at Commons Committee and Commons Report.

The English votes for English laws process applies to public Bills in the House of Commons. To support the process, the Government have agreed that they will provide information to assist the Speaker in considering whether to certify the Bill or any of its provisions for the purposes of English votes for English laws.

The memorandum provides an assessment of the Government amendments to the Neighbourhood Planning Bill at Commons Committee and Commons Report stage, for the purposes of English votes for English laws. The Department’s assessment is that the amendments do not change the territorial application of the Bill. This analysis reflects the position should all the Government amendments at Commons Report be accepted.

I have deposited a copy in the Libraries of both Houses.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Mandatory Housing of Poultry

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): In recent weeks, there have been several reported cases of a highly pathogenic avian flu subtype H5N8 in Europe. As a result, the animal and plant health agency has increased the risk to UK wild birds to medium. The risk to poultry remains low, but heightened. No cases have been found in the UK.

Public Health England (PHE) advises that the threat to public health from H5N8 remains very low and there are currently no recorded cases of this strain in humans.
In response to the risk to poultry and other captive birds, the chief veterinary officer yesterday put in place an avian influenza prevention zone that covers all of England. The purpose of the zone is to require keepers to take additional steps to introduce enhanced biosecurity measures and to protect poultry and other captive birds from contact with wild birds. The zone requires where practicable the immediate and compulsory housing of hens, chicken, turkey and ducks or their complete separation from contact with wild birds. For farmed geese, gamebirds and other captive birds, where housing can be less practical, keepers should take steps to keep these birds separate from wild birds. The additional biosecurity measures are to be taken by all keepers of birds. The zone will remain in place for 30 days. The intention is to give keepers time to put in place other robust biosecurity measures to reduce the risk of avian influenza entering poultry flocks and other captive birds. The requirement to house for 30 days will not affect the free-range status of birds or their eggs.

DEFRA has also enhanced its surveillance of wild birds, with particular emphasis on those species posing the greatest risk. This process will be kept under review and adjusted as necessary in the light of any changes in circumstances.

I urge bird keepers to adopt the best practice biosecurity advice which my Department has made available on gov.uk.

[HCWS327]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The next Justice and Home Affairs Council of the Slovak presidency will take place on 8 and 9 December in Brussels. The Minister for Courts and Justice, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), and the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), will represent the UK.

The Justice day (8 December) will begin with a discussion about the latest developments on the European Public Prosecutor (EPPO) dossier, which the UK will not participate in.

Next on the agenda will be a progress report on discussions with the European Parliament on a compromise approach to the proposal for a directive on the fight against fraud to the Union’s financial interests by means of criminal law (PIF directive). The compromise would have the effect of bringing serious VAT fraud within the scope of the directive. The UK has not opted in to this proposal on the grounds that it would infringe on member states’ competence to control their own taxes.

This will be followed by the first reading of a proposal for a directive concerning contracts for the supply of digital content. The Council will discuss three elements of the proposal with a view to providing indications of Ministers’ preferred approach to ongoing negotiations in Council working group. The UK will continue to promote practicality of application, proportionality and, where appropriate, consistency with existing law.

The final substantive item of the day will cover criminal justice in cyberspace. The presidency will provide updates on progress on two linked issues: securing e-evidence for use in criminal justice proceedings; and how to tackle challenges around encrypted data. The UK’s legislative position on encryption has recently been clarified with Royal Assent of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 on 29 November. We support the presidency’s overarching position of continuing to work to find solutions that ensure our law enforcement agencies can access encrypted data in tightly prescribed circumstances, while respecting the role that encryption plays in protecting citizens’ data.

The Interior day (9 December) will begin with an update on negotiations relating to the reform of common European asylum system (CEAS). Negotiations are ongoing in relation to the inclusion of arrangements for the large-scale relocation of asylum seekers/refugees within the proposed Dublin IV regulation. The UK has not opted in to these regulations. The presidency will also present recent revisions to Eurodac proposals, to which we have opted in. Eurodac has the potential to be a powerful tool in the fight against serious crime and terrorism. We welcome the recent changes to the proposal to make law enforcement access easier in order to support wider security and law enforcement objectives.

The next item will focus on proposals to establish an entry/exit system (EES) to register the movements (and refusals) of third country nationals. As this is a Schengen area measure the UK will not participate. After this the Commission will present its legislative proposals for enhancing the functionality of the second generation Schengen information system (SIS II). We understand these proposals will be published by the Commission the day before the Council, so are not expecting any substantive discussion.

On the migration item, discussion will focus on implementation of the EU-Turkey deal and talks on “effective solidarity” mechanisms for burden sharing around irregular migrant flows. The UK is focused on supporting practical efforts to implement the EU-Turkey deal. The UK will announce an additional package of support to Greece including up to an extra 40 staff over the winter period to support this process and ease congestion on the increasingly overcrowded islands. In particular, we are looking to provide flow management (as recommended by the McKinsey report), case-workers and interpreters (as requested by Greece) and returns expertise (as recommended/requested by both).

On the fight against terrorism item the Commission will update on ongoing co-operation between the EU, member states’ law enforcement agencies and electronic communication service providers to prevent the spread of extremist content that supports radicalisation. It will also cover policy options for tackling the threat to the European Union from returning foreign fighters. The European Counter Terrorism Co-ordinator will present a paper addressing the threat picture, information sharing, criminal justice and disengagement among other topics, which we expect the Council to endorse without a substantive debate.

Finally there will be a short item on how Governments can share best practice in preparing for attacks, drawing lessons from other CT incidents. The UK will outline its approach to preparedness, and encourage EU engagement with information-sharing initiatives.

[HCWS328]
WORK AND PENSIONS
Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will take place on 8 December 2016 in Brussels. I will be representing the UK.

The Council will be invited to reach a general approach on proposals for regulation by the European Parliament and the Council to amend legislation on: the European foundation for the improvement of living and working conditions (Eurofound), the European agency for safety and health at work (EU-OSHA), and a European centre for the development of vocational training (CEDEFOP).

The Council will receive progress reports on the proposal for a European Parliament and Council directive on the posting of workers, the proposal for a European Parliament and Council directive on the accessibility requirements of products and services, and the proposal for a Council directive on the equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion, disability, age or sexual orientation.

The European Commission will present the annual growth survey 2017, the draft joint employment report and draft recommendations on the economic policy of the eurozone, with eurozone members of the Council invited to adopt the Council contribution on the employment and social aspects of the draft recommendation of the economic policy of the euro area. The Chair of the Employment Committee will present a review of social partners’ involvement at national level in the European semester.

The Council will be invited to a policy debate on the European pillar of social rights.

The Council will be invited to adopt draft Council conclusions on the implementation on the youth guarantee and the employment initiative, draft Council conclusions on accelerating the process of Roma integration, and draft Council conclusions on women and poverty.

Under any other business, the Commission will present information on the youth initiative. There will be information from the presidency on: omnibus regulation (EaSI, EGF, FEAD), the new skills agenda, and the outcome of conferences organised by the Slovak presidency. There will be information from the Austrian delegation on the special Olympics World Winter Games, and from the Maltese delegation on the work programme of their upcoming presidency.

[HCWS326]
Written Statements

Thursday 8 December 2016

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Implementing Geological Disposal: Annual Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): I am pleased to announce today the publication of the sixth annual report of the Government’s implementing geological disposal programme. The programme is focused on implementing the geological disposal of higher activity radioactive waste.

The UK Government remain firmly committed to geological disposal as the right policy for the long-term safe and secure management of higher activity radioactive waste, and continue to favour an approach that is based on the willingness of local communities to participate in the siting process.

The publication of the “Implementing Geological Disposal” White Paper in July 2014 set out the policy framework for the future implementation of geological disposal in the UK. Government have been progressing the “Initial Actions” set out in the White Paper, and formal discussions between interested communities and the developer will begin once the “Initial Actions” are complete.

The sixth annual report can be found at: http://www.gov.uk/beis. I have also written to the Chairs of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, and I have made available copies in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS332]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Contingent Liability

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): A minute has been laid before Parliament regarding the funding for Olympic and Paralympic sport via UK Sport, and specifically in relation to incurring a contingent liability.

UK Sport funds Olympic and Paralympic sports and athletes from a mixture of grant in aid and income from the national lottery, and makes its decisions on which sports and which athletes to support at the beginning of each Olympic and Paralympic cycle. Uncertainty around the level of national lottery income in future years means that the UK Sport may need to make decisions based on conservative assumptions of lottery income. This could impact the number of sports and the number of athletes that could be supported between now and the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo in 2020.

To avoid this the Department for Culture, Media and Sport intends to provide, from its available funds, an underwrite of UK Sport’s expected national lottery income so that should it fall below a certain level, the Department will provide additional funding to allow Team GB and Paralympics GB to be properly supported in Tokyo.

This exceptional measure for the current spending review period acknowledges that UK Sport relies on future revenues to agree funding packages now, at the beginning of the next Olympic and Paralympic cycle, to allow the most talented athletes and sports men and women to achieve success at Tokyo.

The Treasury has approved the proposal, and if the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure. This will be funded from within existing DCMS control totals and only applies up to the end of the current spending review period in 2019-20. A full departmental minute has been laid providing more detail on this contingent liability.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-12-08/HCWS337/

[HCWS337]

DEFENCE

Offshore Patrol Vessels

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): I am pleased to announce that the two additional offshore patrol vessels that we committed to build in last year’s Strategic Defence and Security Review will be named HMS Tamar and HMS Spey. The construction of the first, HMS Tamar, formally began today.

These names follow the River Class nomenclature of the Royal Navy’s Offshore Patrol Vessel fleet and continue the tradition of recognising the service, history and battle honours of earlier ships of the name.

Since 1758, six ships have been named after the River Tamar in south-west England, and battle honours were won for Burma 1824-25 and Ashantee 1873-74. Most recently, HMS Tamar was the name of the Royal Navy’s shore establishment in Hong Kong until 1997.

Since 1814, seven ships have been named after the River Spey in north-east Scotland, and battle honours were won for the Atlantic 1940-43, North Africa 1942-43 and Burma 1944-45. The most recent ship, a minesweeper, left service in 1998.

These new 2,000 tonne ships, together with the three already in build, will deliver a more modern and capable fleet, supporting our destroyers and frigates in delivering their tasking, as well as enhancing our contribution to maritime security and fisheries protection.

[HCWS338]
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS
December Agriculture Council

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Agriculture and Fisheries Council will take place on 12 and 13 December in Brussels. I will represent the United Kingdom.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for fisheries will be reaching political agreements on 2017 fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks and groups of stocks in EU waters, certain non-EU waters and the Black sea.

On agriculture, draft conclusions will be adopted on strengthening farmers’ position in the food supply chain and tackling unfair trading practices. There will be an exchange of views concerning agriculture and climate change, and a progress report on the proposed organics regulation.

There are currently two confirmed any other business items labelled for this Council:
- Plant breeders’ rights (tabled by the presidency)
- Information on the application of new plant health regulation (tabled by the Commission).

HOME DEPARTMENT
Al-Qaeda: Alternative Name

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): We have today laid an order under section 3(6) of the Terrorism Act 2000 which, with effect from tomorrow, will specify “Jabhat Fatah al-Sham” as an alias of the proscribed organisation known as Al Qaeda.

Jabhat Fatah al-Sham have previously operated under the name the Al Nusrah Front. Al Qaeda was proscribed in March 2001 and the Al Nusrah Front was recognised as an alias of the group by a name change order in July 2013.

We are clear that terrorist groups should not be able to claim a false legitimacy whilst continuing with their terrorist activities, by simply operating under an alternative name.

Despite the rebranding of the group, we continue to assess that Jabhat Fatah al-Sham is a violent terrorist organisation that retains strong links to AQ and promotes a global extremist ideology. We have no evidence to suggest that Jabhat Fatah al-Sham has changed its methods, aims or ideology.

The effect of this order is to put it beyond any doubt that being a member of or supporting any group operating under this name will be a criminal offence, contrary to sections 11 and 12 of the Terrorism Act. [HCWS333]

Asylum Accommodation

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): There has been considerable interest in the accommodation and support that is provided to asylum seekers. I am committed to ensuring that destitute asylum seekers are accommodated in safe, secure and suitable accommodation and that they are treated with dignity. I have listened carefully to hon. Members and non-governmental organisations’ concerns about the arrangements, including their observations and criticisms of the current contractual arrangements.

The current contractual arrangements expire in 2017, with an option to extend them for a further two years. I have considered carefully whether to extend these contracts and weighed up a range of factors, including the value for money they offer the taxpayer and the improvements that have been made to the standard of accommodation when compared to those achieved under previous arrangements. I have decided to extend the contracts until 2019. However, I recognise that there are improvements that can be made. Therefore I have taken this opportunity to make changes and additional investment to address the concerns that have been raised and improve the services that are provided. These changes will build upon the improvements that we have already made this year in response to the concerns of hon. Members and others.

First I have increased the amount of money that the Home Office pays for the provision of welfare officers and staff property management. This is in direct response to feedback that more attention is needed to ensure that asylum seekers receive the welfare support they need and are able to raise any concerns they have with the accommodation providers. It will also ensure that property standards continue to be closely managed and further improved; and that sufficient suitable property is available. The money will only be available for the employment of additional resources engaged directly on these customer-focused activities.

I have also agreed that the Department should work with providers on developing different contractual terms to ensure that there is sufficient initial accommodation available and thereby further reduce the need to use contingency arrangements, such as hotels, in the future. I am pleased to report that the use of contingency accommodation is already much reduced but these changes will add in resilience, further reduce the numbers and keep them down.

Finally I have introduced a new higher price band for any increases in the number of asylum seekers requiring accommodation, this will allow the providers to further increase their property portfolios if required and widen the areas in which they operate. This will reduce the need to continually increase the number of asylum seekers accommodated in certain communities. This follows work to increase the number of local authority areas that participate in the asylum dispersal scheme, which I am pleased to report has increased the number of participating areas by over one third in the past 18 months.

The Department will continue to monitor the providers closely to ensure that they comply with the requirements of the contract and work closely with non-government organisations and service users to respond to feedback and continue to improve the system.

My officials have started work on putting in place new arrangements for when these contracts expire in 2019. This work is at an early stage and we are engaging with a range of stakeholders to consider options for the future arrangements. [HCWS335]
Gangmasters Licensing Authority

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The 2015-16 annual report and accounts for the Gangmasters Licensing Authority are today being laid before the House and will be published on www.gov.uk. Copies will also be available in the Vote Office.

HMIC: PEEL Legitimacy and Leadership Report

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary (HMIC) has today published its legitimacy and leadership reports as part of the 2016-17 PEEL inspection programme. Today's report by the inspectorate delivers, in general, a positive assessment of forces' ability to keep individuals safe and reduce crime while acting with legitimacy and in providing effective leadership.

The legitimacy report includes the response to a commission by the Prime Minister, then Home Secretary, to examine the issue of police officers developing inappropriate relationships with victims of domestic abuse and vulnerable individuals. And in this area, its findings are shocking.

As the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, I wish to reiterate that the vast majority of police officers and police staff, including PCSOs, conduct themselves, with the highest standards of integrity. The inspectorate highlights a number of positive stories of best practice that have developed within some police forces to address the issues related to abuse of authority and inappropriate relationships.

However, HMIC's findings indicate that more is needed from the policing profession as a whole to demonstrate to the public, and to the perpetrators, that there is no place in policing for those who abuse their authority for sexual gain. Where these instances do occur it undermines justice, lets down the majority of decent, hardworking individuals serving in policing, and causes serious damage to the public's confidence in the police.

While some progress has been made in tackling this issue, decisive action is needed to improve how forces detect and respond to this type of abuse where it occurs. Today I have written to both the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) and the College of Policing to set out the Government's expectations and commission the further work needed to address the shortcomings HMIC has identified.

Code on professional boundaries and personal relationships

First, a clear message is required for all who serve in policing about the need for professional boundaries to be maintained and the importance of police officers and police staff not using their professional position to pursue inappropriate relationships with current or former victims, witnesses or suspects. There must be zero tolerance for those who overstep these boundaries and this change in culture is needed across all ranks and all aspects of policing.

The College of Policing are now looking at the feasibility of developing a new supplementary addendum to the code of ethics. The addendum would establish clear guidelines on professional boundaries and personal relationships to set out the expectations and requirements of all who serve in policing in maintaining appropriate relationships and responding to these issues where they occur. I have asked that the college further support this work by building this issue into training and other work on vulnerability.

National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) led work to produce a national strategy for dealing with corruption and abuse of authority for sexual gain

Secondly, there is need for the sector to be more consistent in how it identifies and responds to this wrongdoing, with a need for improved capability in many forces to proactively detect and deter police officers and staff acting in this way.

Work is already under way within the NPCC to establish a national strategy for dealing with abuse of authority for sexual gain and associated corruption which should be ready by the end of March 2017. The chair of the NPCC, Chief Constable Sara Thornton, will now ensure this strategy addresses the capability concerns that HMIC has identified, including systems and device monitoring, risk profiling and intelligence gathering to identify individuals who have used police databases or devices to seek out vulnerable people to establish sexual contact.

National consistency in recording and reporting

HMIC's report indicates there is a shortcoming in how different forces define and report these offences leading to inconsistent understanding of the scale and handling of these matters.

Therefore as part of the national strategy, the NPCC will ensure this includes a consistent definition which clarifies how abuse of authority relates to corruption, and how policing should record and respond to these matters where they are identified.

Mandatory referral to the Independent Police Complaints Commission

Finally, we must ensure that the legislative framework is clear in setting out how these matters should be handled.

Abuse of authority for sexual gain constitutes serious corruption and should be referred to the Independent Police Complaints Commission for consideration. However, as HMIC's report makes clear, forces are not referring all such matters.

The Government therefore intend to bring forward changes to the Police (Complaints and Misconduct) Regulations 2012 to put beyond doubt that these matters must be referred automatically to the IPCC.

I am confident that these concrete measures will build on the recent steps taken by police forces across England and Wales to address these issues. There must be no doubt that further action and stronger leadership across all ranks is needed to prevent, identify and respond to the harm caused by those who abuse their position of authority.

The message must be unequivocal that those who do abuse their power for sexual gain have no place in policing.

[HCWS336]
Policy Framework states that if the local planning authority deliverable housing sites.

plan is being undermined because their local planning neighbourhood plans are often frustrated that their have been proactive and worked hard to bring forward not normally be granted. However, communities who has been brought into force, planning permission should application conflicts with a neighbourhood plan that approximately 10% more homes than the number for that for a housing number have on average planned for 2011, and is an important part of the Government’s plans in force and many more in preparation, they are already a well-established part of the English planning system. Recent analysis suggests that giving people more control over development in their area is helping system. Recent analysis suggests that giving people more control over development in their area is helping to boost housing supply—those plans in force that plan for a housing number have on average planned for approximately 10% more homes than the number for that area set out by the relevant local planning authority. The Government confirm that where a planning application conflicts with a neighbourhood plan that has been brought into force, planning permission should not normally be granted. However, communities who have been proactive and worked hard to bring forward neighbourhood plans are often frustrated that their plan is being undermined because their local planning authority cannot demonstrate a five-year land supply of deliverable housing sites.

This is because Paragraph 49 of the National Planning Policy Framework states that if the local planning authority cannot demonstrate a five-year supply of deliverable housing sites relevant policies for the supply of housing should not be considered up-to-date, and housing applications should be considered in the context of the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

As more communities take up the opportunity to shape their area we need to make sure planning policy is suitable for a system with growing neighbourhood planning coverage. Building on proposals to further strengthen neighbourhood planning through the Neighbourhood Planning Bill, I am today making clear that where communities plan for housing in their area in a neighbourhood plan, those plans should not be deemed to be out-of-date unless there is a significant lack of land supply for housing in the wider local authority area. We are also offering those communities who brought forward their plans in advance of this statement time to review their plans.

This means that relevant policies for the supply of housing in a neighbourhood plan that is part of the development plan should not be deemed to be “out-of-date” under paragraph 49 of the National Planning Policy Framework where all of the following circumstances arise at the time the decision is made:

- the neighbourhood plan allocates sites for housing; and
- the local planning authority can demonstrate a three-year supply of deliverable housing sites.

This written ministerial statement is less than 2 years old, or the neighbourhood plan has been part of the development plan for 2 years or less:

This statement applies to decisions made on planning applications and appeals from today. This statement should be read in conjunction with the National Planning Policy Framework and is a material consideration in relevant planning decisions.

My Department will be bringing forward a White Paper on Housing in due course. Following consultation, we anticipate the policy for neighbourhood planning set out in this statement will be revised to reflect policy brought forward to ensure new neighbourhood plans meet their fair share of local housing need and housing is being delivered across the wider local authority area. It is, however, right to take action now to protect communities who have worked hard to produce their neighbourhood plan and find the housing supply policies are deemed to be out-of-date through no fault of their own.

On 7 July 2016, my right hon. Friend, the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), extended for a period of six months the criteria for consideration of the recovery of planning appeals to include proposals for residential development over 25 dwellings in areas where a qualifying body has submitted a neighbourhood plan proposal to the local planning authority but the relevant plan has not been made (Hansard HCWS74). In order to allow time for the Neighbourhood Planning Bill to complete its passage through Parliament, and in the light of other potential policy changes currently under consideration, I am now extending that period for a further six months from today.

HCWS346

Race and Faith Policy

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Today, I am pleased to inform the House that the UK Government are the first European Union country to formally adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of anti-Semitism. The Government believe that the definition, although legally non-binding, is an important tool for criminal justice agencies, and other public bodies to understand how anti-Semitism manifests itself in the 21st century, as it gives examples of the kind of behaviours which depending on the circumstances could constitute anti-Semitism. It will be for public bodies and agencies to implement the definition and embed it within operational guidance as relevant.

In addition, the Government have published its response to the Home Affairs Select Committee’s report on anti-Semitism, and provided a progress update to the All-Party Parliamentary Group against Anti-Semitism Inquiry into the rise in the number of anti-Semitic incidents following the Gaza conflict in 2014.

Our response to both reports demonstrates the significant progress we have made in combating anti-Semitism which has been acknowledged by the Home Affairs Select Committee and the All-Party Parliamentary Group against Anti-Semitism. Our approach has also been cited as best practice across Europe and the Americas.

However, we cannot be complacent. Anti-Semitism continues to be a problem in this country and it is right that, as a Government, we are able to demonstrate the seriousness with which we take it, as we do for other forms of hate crime. Anti-Semitism must be understood
for what it is—an attack on the identity of people who live, contribute and are valued in our society. Our relationship with the Jewish community has been built on the solid work of the cross-Government working group on tackling anti-Semitism, which ensures that we are alive to any issues and concerns of the Jewish community and can respond quickly.

The adoption of the definition and our positive response to both reports underlines how the Government have done much to establish Britain as a safer place for Jewish people.

[HCWS345]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION


The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): The General Affairs Council (GAC) on Tuesday 13 December is expected to focus on:

- Multiannual financial framework review/revision; enlargement and stabilisation and association process; preparation of the December European Council 15-16 December; inter-institutional agreement and legislative programming; and the European semester 2017.

- Mid-term review of the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)

The presidency will present an update on the mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework.

Preparation for the December European Council

There will be a discussion on the draft annotated agenda of the upcoming December European Council (DEC), which covers: migration, security (internal and external/defence) economic and social development (youth) and external relations, which will cover the EU/Ukraine association agreement.

Inter-institutional agreement on “Better Law-Making”

The presidency will provide information on the implementation of the inter-institutional agreement and seek approval of the draft joint declaration on inter-institutional priorities.

European semester 2017

The European semester is the EU’s annual cycle of economic policy co-ordination with member states. The presidency will present the autumn package of this year’s EU semester.

Enlargement package

The Foreign Office Minister of State will take part in the discussion on enlargement. The Council will agree a package of conclusions in response to the 9 November Commission communication on EU enlargement policy and country reports.

[HCWS343]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): My right hon. Friend, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Anelay of St Johns), has made the following written ministerial statement:

I wish to inform the House that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, together with the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence, are today publishing the annual report 2016 on progress on the UK’s third national action plan on women, peace and security, which was published on 12 June 2014 (HC Deb, 16 June 2014, cc72-4WS).

The national action plan sets out our priorities on women, peace and security from 2014-17. It provides direction and vision to the Government and their partners as we work to ensure that women and girls are at the centre of our efforts to prevent, respond to and resolve conflict.

The report published today outlines our overall progress on the national action plan. It highlights our overseas work in the six focus countries: Afghanistan, Burma, Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Somalia and Syria. It gives details of our activities under the four main pillars of women, peace and security: participation, prevention, protection and relief and recovery.

It also reports on our progress towards implementing the commitments we made in October 2015 at UN Security Council high level review of resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.

We will continue to report to Parliament annually on progress, with our final report due in December 2017. We are already planning our fourth national action plan which will follow directly afterwards.

I will deposit copies of the report in Library of the House. The progress report has been published online: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-national-action-plan-on-women-peace-and-security.

[HCWS344]

Foreign Affairs Council December 2016

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I will attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 12 December. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

The agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is expected to include EU-Africa relations, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and external migration. Ministers will discuss Syria and Iraq over lunch.

EU-Africa relations

EU Foreign Ministers will discuss EU-Africa relations ahead of the EU-Africa summit (which is likely to take place in November 2017). The UK remains committed to working with African nations in partnership and for mutual benefit on shared interests of security, migration and prosperity, strengthening the continent’s own ability to respond to threats and maximise opportunities. European partners play a key role in Africa and we expect discussions to range across politics, security and economics. Migration will be covered substantively later in the day. The UK will look to ensure EU-Africa relations are positively focused on mutual growth, trade and investment.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Discussions will focus on EU sanctions in response to recent violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the ongoing political impasse there. President Kabila is deeply unpopular but is showing no sign of stepping down when his term of office ends on 19 December. Widespread protests are expected. The Council will
agree sanctions against seven individuals identified as having been responsible for human rights abuses and the obstruction of the electoral process. The UK, alongside France and Belgium, has led the EU response to the political crisis. The sanctions aim to apply pressure on the Government to find an inclusive political solution and schedule timely presidential elections, ideally in 2017.

Migration

High Representative Mogherini is expected to provide an update on progress establishing migration partnership frameworks with the five initial priority countries—Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. The discussion may also cover potential countries for the next wave of partnerships. We support the comprehensive approach envisaged under the frameworks and will continue to argue that there should be enhanced engagement on migration, even if not full partnership frameworks, with major source and transit countries. The frameworks should not divert attention from other migration initiatives, such as the Khartoum process and implementation of the Valletta action plan (between EU and African states).

Syria and Iraq

Ministers will discuss the devastating assault on eastern Aleppo and what more the EU can do to achieve a full ceasefire in order to pursue a credible political process in Syria. Ministers are expected to discuss how the EU can support the UN's humanitarian plan for the city and will continue to call on the Syrian regime to allow aid in. Ministers will discuss the ongoing military campaign in Mosul and the continued importance of the global coalition following Daesh's military defeat in Iraq. That includes the challenge of ensuring that Mosul is liberated in a manner that protects civilians, minimises the humanitarian impact, and limits longer-term conflict by supporting political reconciliation. Ministers are also expected to discuss the wider challenge of addressing those underlying political factors which led to the rise of Daesh in Iraq.

JUSTICE

Youth Justice

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Elizabeth Truss): This Government are determined to improve standards in youth justice so that we do not only punish crime but also intervene earlier to prevent crime and reform offenders to stop further crimes being committed—protecting victims and building better lives.

Youth offending has fallen sharply over the past decade, as has the number of children and young people in custody. However, once those children and young people are in custody, the outcomes are not good enough. Levels of violence and self-harm are too great and reoffending rates are unacceptably high, with 69% of those sentenced to custody going on to commit further offences within a year of their release.

When children and young people commit crime, it is right that they face the consequences of their actions and that the justice system delivers reparation for victims. But we must also do more to reform them. The 900 young offenders now in custody represent some of the most complex and damaged children and young people within society. Broken homes, drug and alcohol misuse, generational joblessness, abusive relationships, childhoods spent in care, mental illness, gang membership and educational failure are common in the backgrounds of many offenders. Youth custody needs to be more than just containment where children are exposed to yet more violence and given little hope that things may ever change. We must make sure it is a safe and secure environment that can equip young offenders with the skills they need to lead law-abiding lives. The system should provide discipline, purpose, supervision and someone who cares—elements that have all too often been missing from these young lives.

The Prison Safety and Reform White Paper published last month outlined how we will improve adult prisons by giving greater powers to governors and boosting the safety, transparency and accountability of regimes. We will apply the same principles to the way the justice system deals with children and young people who commit crimes.

Last year, the experienced school head and child behaviour expert Charlie Taylor was commissioned by the Government to look at how this country deals overall with children and young people who break the law. Today, I am publishing the report of Charlie Taylor’s Review of the Youth Justice System and the Government’s response. The Taylor Review makes a compelling case for change and we will be implementing his key recommendations.

The Government’s response sets out how, informed by Mr Taylor’s findings, we will put in place the right framework for improvement, tackle offending by children and young people and put education at the heart of youth custody to better address the factors that increase the risk of young people committing crimes.

We will start by bringing greater clarity and accountability to the youth justice system so that at each stage we are driving to reduce reoffending and turn lives around. We want to see an effective system—both in the community and in custody with high standards of performance. To tackle violence in custody we will clarify commissioning functions and create a single head of youth custodial operations, who can keep a firm grip on the performance of the estate and ensure that we reduce violence so that the estate becomes a place of safety and reform. We will strengthen inspection arrangements and create a new mechanism for the inspectorate to trigger intervention. Where there are failing institutions the Secretary of State will be obliged to act.

Youth custody must be a safe, secure environment where children and young people can learn and turn their lives around and to ensure this we will boost the number of frontline staff by 20%. We will also introduce a new professional Youth Justice Officer role to ensure that more staff are specifically trained to reform with young people. To ensure the right level of support each young person will now have a dedicated officer responsible for challenging and supporting them to reach agreed goals. Each officer will be responsible for four children or young people, so that each person gets the level of attention they need to turn their life around.

To ensure that more children and young people make progress in maths and English we will give governors the responsibility for education and hold them to account for the progress made in these crucial subjects while young people are in custody. We will also better prepare children and young people for a life after their sentence...
with a youth custody apprenticeship scheme being developed, ensuring that all young people are earning or learning on release.

Alongside these improvements to the existing estate, we will go further to more comprehensively transform youth custody by developing two new secure schools in line with the approach recommended by Mr Taylor in his ground-breaking report.

Of course we need to do more and we will. Intervening early is crucial in reducing youth crime, and we will be looking at how to improve services locally and improve the court system for young people. Together with the urgent action required to transform youth custody into places of discipline and purpose, these changes will improve the outcomes for young people who end up in the criminal justice system, helping them take a better path and improving outcomes for society as a whole by reducing crime. [HCWS341]

TRANSPORT

Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I attended the only Transport Council under the Slovak presidency (the presidency) in Brussels on Thursday 1 December.

The Council adopted a general approach to update the civil aviation safety regulatory framework of the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), the first on an aviation file since 2014. I welcomed the beneficial move away from prescription to proportionate risk and performance based regulation which was also widely supported by other member states. I supported efforts to encourage innovation and growth, particularly for unmanned aircraft, although shared the concerns of other member states on the need to carefully monitor developments in this sector in urban areas.

The Council adopted a general approach on the revised directive for safety rules and standards for passenger ships. I supported this approach and the objective of simplifying and clarifying the existing directive, in particular the proposal that standards for the smallest passenger ships are better suited to regulation at national level. A general approach on the amending directive on the system of inspections for ro-ro ferries and high speed passenger craft was also adopted. I welcomed this revision which clarifies and simplifies the inspection regime, providing clear guidance on carrying out inspections while maintaining the same level of safety. A progress report on the proposal to review the directive on the registration of persons sailing on-board passenger ships was also noted by the Council.

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Under any other business, a range of items were discussed. At the request of Germany, the Commission gave its views on the progress of revisions to the real driving emissions regulations and called on member states for support on agreeing EURO V standards and creating a regime for EU supervision and centralised type approval. Commissioners Bulc and King gave an update on the Commission’s recent work on transport security, highlighting that aviation security in the EU was well advanced but that the Commission was considering legislative action for maritime and land transport. I welcomed co-operation and sharing best practice but, along with other member states, expressed the importance of a proportionate approach and the need to maintain accessibility for passengers.

At the request of France and Germany, the Commission provided an update on the forthcoming roads initiatives followed by a discussion of member state priorities. I expressed support for a level playing field on implementation of cabotage rules and the need to balance effective enforcement of regulations with reduced administrative burdens for small and medium sized businesses. During the discussion member states expressed concerns around the need to improve social conditions in the road haulage sector, the problem of fraudulent drivers’ hours reporting, and minimum wages for foreign drivers.

In addition, the Commission updated the Council on: global efforts to reduce transport emissions at the 39th Assembly of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), at which the UK played a pivotal role and the International Maritime Organisation’s Marine Environment Protection Committee; its low emission mobility strategy; the state of play on the Galileo project, its recent work on women in transport aimed at recommending ways of attracting more women into the transport sector; the recent review of the cross-border enforcement directive; and the road safety statistics for 2016. Member states were broadly supportive of the recent work done by the Commission, and set out domestic measures to cut transport emissions and improve the gender balance in transport.

There were also a range of information points from member states under Any Other Business. The Cypriot delegation provided information on the draft EU-Turkey aviation agreement in relation to sovereignty, non-discrimination and aviation safety; the Dutch updated the Council on cooperation in the field of connected and automated driving; and the Maltese delegation set out their transport priorities for their forthcoming presidency.

Over lunch, Commissioner Bulc and the Vice President of the European Investment Bank led a discussion on the European fund for strategic investments. [HCWS340]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Automatic Enrolment: Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): I am pleased to confirm both the scope of the automatic enrolment review and the proposed automatic enrolment thresholds for the next financial year.

Automatic enrolment has been a great success to date with almost 7 million people enrolled by more than 293,000 employers. It will give around 11 million people the opportunity to save into a workplace pension and we expect this to lead to around 10 million people newly saving or saving more by 2018, generating around £17 billion a year more in workplace pension saving by 2019-20.
Analysis cited in DWP’s annual automatic enrolment evaluation report today shows that nearly £82 billion was saved into workplace pensions last year by employees who were eligible for automatic enrolment.

**Automatic Enrolment Review**

It is important to continue to build on this success, and I am keen to ensure that there is joint consensus from across industry as we move to the next stage of this policy.

The main focus of the review will be to ensure that automatic enrolment continues to meet the needs of individual savers. In doing this we will look at the existing coverage of the policy and consider the needs of those not currently benefiting from automatic enrolment, for example employees with multiple jobs who do not meet the criteria for automatic enrolment in any of their jobs. We will also examine the automatic enrolment thresholds namely, the trigger and the qualifying earnings bands required by legislation (section 14 of the Pensions Act 2008) and the age criteria for automatic enrolment. I would also like to use the review to consider how the growing group of self-employed people can be helped to save for their retirement.

The review will be an opportunity to consider whether the technical operation of the policy is working as intended. In doing this we will consider whether there may be any policies which disproportionately affect different categories of employers or could be further simplified.

The review will also include the requirements set in legislation relating to the statutory review of the alternative quality requirements for defined benefits schemes (section 23A of the Pensions Act 2008) and for the certification requirements for money purchase schemes (section 28 of Pensions Act 2008).

An examination of the level of the charge cap, which was intended to take place in 2017, will also be incorporated within this review. This will assess whether the level of the cap should be changed and whether some or all transactions costs should be covered by the cap.

In the early part of 2017 we will be engaging with stakeholders from across industry on these issues. Towards the end of 2017 we will publish a report setting out policy recommendations.

The review will be an opportunity to strengthen the evidence around appropriate future contributions into workplace pensions. It will also consider how engagement with individuals can be improved so that savers have a stronger sense of personal ownership and are better enabled to maximise savings. We do not expect to make policy decisions on these areas during 2017.

The automatic enrolment review work will be led by a DWP team and supported by an external advisory group. This group, which will be chaired by and made up of experts from within the pensions industry, and those representing member interests and employers, will provide insight and a challenge function to help shape proposals. In early 2017 we will announce membership and the terms of reference for this group.

**Annual Thresholds review**

The annual review of the automatic enrolment earnings thresholds has also now been completed.

It is intended to lay an order before Parliament in the new year which will include the following, for 2017-18: £45,000 for the upper limit of the qualifying earnings band; £5,876 for the lower limit of the qualifying earnings band.

The automatic enrolment earnings trigger will be frozen at £10,000.

I will place a copy of the analysis (review of the automatic enrolment earnings trigger and qualifying earnings band for 2017-18: supporting analysis) supporting the proposed revised thresholds in the House Library. These papers will be available later today on www.gov.uk website.

[HCWS339]
Written Statements

Tuesday 13 December 2016

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):
A meeting of The Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 6 December 2016. EU Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

Early morning session

Ministers were briefed on the outcomes of the 5 December meeting of the Eurogroup and the European Commission presented an update on the current economic situation.

Investment plan for Europe

Ministers discussed proposals for the investment plan for Europe and reached a general approach on the Commission’s proposal to amend the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) legislation as part of the planned extension beyond its original 2015-2018 lifetime. Ministers also discussed draft council conclusions on measures to tackle bottlenecks to investment identified under the third pillar of the investment plan for Europe.

Anti-money laundering directive 2

Ministers discussed the Commission’s proposals on the anti-money laundering directive (ATAD2).

Enhanced co-operation in the area of financial transaction tax

Ministers received an update on the proposal for a Council directive implementing enhanced co-operation in the area of financial transaction tax.

Banking union: risk-reduction measures

The Council presidency presented its new proposals, published on November 23, to revise the capital and resolution frameworks for banks and large investment firms, which was followed by an exchange of views.

Anti-money laundering directive

The Council presidency provided an update on the discussions for proposal for a directive on the prevention of the use of the financial system for the purposes of money laundering or terrorist financing.

Current financial service legislative proposals

The Council presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

VAT digital package

The Commission presented on the digital single market VAT package.

Deepening the economic and monetary union: Follow-up on the 5 Presidents’ report

The Commission provided information on the 5 Presidents’ report: Completing Europe’s economic and monetary union.

Improving the predictability and transparency of the stability and growth pact

Ministers endorsed draft Council conclusions on improving the predictability and transparency of the stability and growth pact.

Report on strategic issues in the area of customs by the high level group of customs directors general

Ministers were informed about the outcome of the pilot meeting of the high level group of directors general for customs policy, taxation and customs co-operation on 25 October 2016.

European semester 2017

The Commission presented to Ministers on the publication of the 2017 annual growth survey (AGS) and alert mechanism report (AMR), which was followed by an exchange of views.

Implementation of the Banking Union

Ministers discussed the current state of play regarding implementation of banking union within the eurozone.

Fight against the financing of terrorism

The Commission gave a presentation on the fight against the financing of terrorism.

Capital Markets Union

The Commission provided information on the capital markets union.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones):
On 19 October 2016, I announced my intention, after careful consideration of the recommendation of the commissioner team, to return licensing functions to Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. On the same day, representations were invited from the authority regarding this intention. I have now considered the representations, including from the leader and the chief executive, and I am satisfied that the council is now able to exercise this service area in compliance with the best value duty and that the people of Rotherham can have confidence that this will be the case.

Therefore, today I am exercising my powers under section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999 to return licensing, including all associated executive and non-executive functions, to the council. Handing back this function will allow some democratic control to be returned and is an important milestone for the council, which has demonstrated steady progress in its improvement journey.

Today, the Secretary of State for Education and I have issued further directions amending the directions issued on 11 February 2016 that return this service area to the authority. With effect from 13 December, councillors will be responsible for decision making in this area. The commissioners will continue to provide oversight on licensing as well as the set of functions returned in February 2016 and ensure that they are exercised in accordance with the statutory best value duty. Commissioners also continue to retain power on additional service areas including children’s services (including all services relating to child sexual exploitation); adult social care and audit.

I am placing a copy of the documents associated with this announcement in the Library of the House and on my Department’s website.

[HCWS349]

[HCWS351]
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telecommunications Council

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock):
The EU Council of Ministers’ Telecommunications Council took place in Brussels on 2 December 2016. I represented the UK at this Council. As is procedure, this statement sets out a formal record of that meeting.

The first item was a policy debate on the two legislative instruments and two communications that form the European Commission’s recently-published connectivity package:

- The European electronic communications code directive (First reading—EM 12252/16);
- Regulation on body of European regulators for electronic communications (First reading—EM12257/16);
- Communication on “5G for Europe: An action plan” (EM12279/16); and

My intervention was as per the pre-Council statement. The Council then adopted a general approach on amending regulation (EU) No 531/2012 as regards rules for wholesale roaming markets (First reading—EM 13555/13).

The Council was then provided with an update from the Slovak presidency on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on cross-border parcel delivery services (First reading—EM9706/16). There was no substantive debate on this item.

The Council then adopted a partial general approach on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending regulations as regards the promotion of internet connectivity in local communities (First reading—EM 12259/16).

This was then followed by three items under AOB led by the Commission, the first being on fair use policy in the context of roaming services, followed by information on digital single market initiatives and finally under AOB, current internet governance issues. There were no substantive debates on any of these items.

Finally, the Maltese delegation informed the Council of their priorities for their forthcoming presidency before Council adjourned until the next meeting in Q2 2017. [HCWS347]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Lebanese Armed Forces

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Contagion from the worsening crisis in Syria is having a direct effect on its neighbours, particularly in areas adjacent to Lebanon’s eastern border. The UK remains firmly committed to Lebanon’s stability and security. Our support to the Lebanese armed forces (LAF) aims to minimise contagion from the Syrian conflict and combat the spread of Daesh. As part of this commitment, since 2012 the UK has been assisting the LAF through the rapid land border security assistance project, to establish and mentor the LAF land border regions (LBRs).

Lebanon faces a number of budgetary pressures, including the cost of hosting 1.2 million Syrian refugees, and would be unable to fund the LBRs without UK support. This project is the main pillar of our defence co-operation with Lebanon and our efforts to protect stability in the region. The mission of the LBRs is to observe, identify, deter and deny activities by illegal armed actors in the near border areas, in line with agreed international human rights standards. Between 2012 and 2016, approximately £38 million of conflict pool and conflict security and stability funds were allocated to provide observation, protection, mobility and communications equipment to 1st, 2nd, and 3rd LBRs, and to establish key elements of a 4th LBR, as well as a programme of training and mentoring.

The command element of the 4th LBR has been established, and is preparing its deployment plan to cover the remaining 25% of the borders with Syria, from Arsal to Masnaa. Recent Daesh actions in the Arsal area pose a threat to UK and Lebanese security, and make it imperative that the LAF completes the expansion of the LBRs southwards. This is part of an overall strategy to bring the entire eastern border with Syria back under the authority of the state.

We intend to provide a package of £4,867,665.18 of observation and operating equipment for the continued development of the 4th LBR of the Lebanese armed forces. It will be funded by the Government’s conflict, security and stability fund. The equipment has been assessed under the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria. There are no objections to the release of these items to the LAF.

The proposed provision of equipment has been scrutinised and approved by a senior, cross-Whitehall conflict, stability and security fund (CSSF) approval board, which has confirmed that it is in line with the Government’s strategic objectives. FCO officials have also assessed the project for human rights risks, using the overseas security and justice assistance guidelines established by the former Foreign Secretary in 2011. They concluded that the risk of human rights violations arising from the project’s delivery could be successfully mitigated.

If, during the period of four parliamentary sitting days beginning on the date on which this statement was made before the House of Commons, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or a motion relating to the minute, or by otherwise raising the matter in the House, final approval will be withheld pending an examination of the objection. [HCWS350]
report of the meeting and conclusions adopted will be deposited in the Library of the House for the convenience of Members.

The UK is leaving the EU. While we remain a member we will continue to play a full role in line with our rights and obligations and represent the interests of the people of the United Kingdom.

European consensus on development

The Council discussed the European Commission proposal on a new European consensus on development following a presentation by Neven Mimica, the Commissioner for International Co-operation and Development. Discussion of a new consensus, in light of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, centred on retaining the fundamental focus on poverty eradication and human development, but with calls for more work on tackling the root causes of migration; engaging civil society and the private sector; and ensuring greater links between development and humanitarian work. I emphasised the need to finish the job on the millennium development goals, but to also go beyond aid to support countries emerging from poverty.

A renewed partnership with Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific ("Post-Cotonou")

Development Commissioner Mimica set out a proposal to renew the EU’s partnership with Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) when the Cotonou agreement expires in 2020. I highlighted the UK’s desire for a differentiated approach towards partner countries at different stages of development and called for a light-touch framework which gives flexibility to work with different developing country partners as well as non-EU donors, saying that the UK wanted to take a full part in the debate now and could be a partner in future. I also welcomed the broad focus on Africa and the continued importance of the EU’s relationship with the Caribbean and the Pacific.

HRVP Mogherini concluded that more work needed to be done to achieve a common position before a negotiating mandate could be proposed next year.

Energy and development

Council conclusions on energy and development were agreed by the Council during a lunch discussion attended by Ministers and Maroš Šefcovic, Vice-President of the European Commission with responsibility for the energy union. Vice-President Šefcovic focused on the importance of improving linkages between energy and sustainable development. I emphasised the opportunity provided by enhanced private sector involvement in renewable energy investments.

Migration and development

HRVP Mogherini led discussions between member states that built on the various initiatives that had been launched since last year’s Valletta summit, including the emergency trust fund for Africa, the new partnership framework and ongoing negotiations on the external investment plan. On the partnership framework, the UK joined other member states in calling for a full assessment on the effectiveness of progress with current priority countries before further expansion.

Other agenda items

Ministers adopted several sets of Council conclusions, including on mainstreaming digital solutions and technologies in EU development policy, the Court of Auditors report on humanitarian aid to the great lakes region, energy and development, and the EU common position for the second high-level meeting of the global partnership for effective development co-operation. Details of these Council conclusions will also be placed in the Library of the House.
The Council received an update from the presidency on progress in negotiation of the energy efficiency labelling directive and the decision on inter-governmental agreements.

The Commission presented recent developments in the field of external energy relations, which included the Paris agreement entering into force and the recent signature of the memorandum of understanding with Ukraine.

Finally, the Maltese delegation presented its priorities for its presidency. These fell into three areas: completing files already under discussion; creating momentum on the clean energy package, with informal and formal Council meetings focused on this agenda; and EU-Mediterranean co-operation.

**Renewable Heat Incentive**

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): Today my noble Friend the Minister of State for Energy and Intellectual Property has made the following statement:

In March 2016, the Government set out their proposals to reform the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme in the consultation “The Renewable Heat Incentive: A reformed and refocused scheme”. The consultation ran from 3 March to 27 April 2016 and received 370 responses from individuals, businesses, trade bodies and other organisations. I am pleased to announce that the Government response to the consultation has been published today.

Heat accounts for almost half of UK energy use and a third of UK carbon emissions. Decarbonising how we use heat in our homes, businesses and buildings is therefore an essential part of how we transition to a low-carbon economy. It can also in time help to make heating homes and other buildings more efficient and affordable.

In November 2015, the Government renewed their commitment to the transition to a low-carbon economy by confirming a continued budget for the RHI out to 2020-21. By confirming the available budget and setting out a number of reforms for how the scheme will operate, the Government intend to provide the level of certainty needed for consumers and industry to invest in renewable heating and for the market to transition towards being sustainable without Government support in future.

It is vital that the scheme delivers value for money for taxpayers and supports the development of technologies that will be important for the long term. That is why we will be reforming the scheme to ensure it:

- Focuses on long-term decarbonisation: promoting the deployment of the right technologies for the right uses, while ensuring the RHI contributes to both our decarbonisation targets and to the UK’s renewable energy target.
- Offers better value for money and protects consumers: improving how costs are controlled, giving consumers more confidence in the performance of particular technologies and addressing potential loopholes in the scheme.
- Supports supply chain growth and challenges the market to deliver: driving cost reductions and innovation to help build growing markets that provide quality to consumers and are sustainable without Government support in future.

**HOME DEPARTMENT**

Chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am pleased to announce that Dr Owen Bowden-Jones has been appointed to the ACMD both as a member and as its new chair. This appointment is
for a three year term, beginning on 1 January 2017. Dr Bowden-Jones is an experienced clinician who provides assessment and treatment for people experiencing harms from emerging problem drugs.

The ACMD was established under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and provides advice to Government on issues related to the harms of drugs. It also has a statutory role under the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016. Dr Bowden-Jones will replace Professor Les Iversen, whose term ends at the end of this year.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Iversen for his dedication to chairing the ACMD over the past seven years.

[HCWS352]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEAL TH OFFICE

North Korea

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): I would like to update the House on recent developments regarding the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the international response and what actions the Government are taking.

The Government remain deeply concerned by North Korea’s continued development of its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. This year we have seen two nuclear tests from North Korea, and an unprecedented number of ballistic missile launches. These actions have been accompanied by threatening rhetoric, and the continued prioritisation of the weapons programme over the well-being and needs of the North Korean people.

On 14 September, I informed the House that the UN Security Council had agreed that North Korea’s fifth nuclear test on 9 September was a clear violation of existing Security Council resolutions, and that there would be a robust response.

On 30 November, the UN Security Council adopted Security Council resolution 2321, a package of new, stronger measures to deter and challenge North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. This resolution builds on the provisions of UN Security Council resolutions 1718, 1874, 2087, 2094 and 2270.

Significant measures in the new resolution are designed to constrain and disrupt the DPRK’s nuclear intentions. The new cap on coal exports, with a UN oversight mechanism, will directly affect the DPRK’s ability to raise foreign currency for their nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. This is estimated to reduce DPRK foreign trade income by $700 million, and when combined with a metals export ban, will cut DPRK trade income by a quarter.

The resolution tightens existing measures, and enhances controls on technology imports, on shipping, and on banking, as well as demonstrating a new resolve to disrupt any abuse of diplomatic privileges. This will send a strong signal as well as have important practical effects. This text, in addition to the UN Third Committee resolution on DPRK human rights adopted on 15 November, makes clear the explicit link between the DPRK’s proliferation choices and their shameful treatment of their own people. The United Kingdom has worked closely with P5 partners throughout the development of UNSCR 2321, and will be at the forefront of the discussion amongst EU member states as we transpose the UNSCR swiftly into EU law.

Both I and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs have spoken with counterparts regarding the increasingly belligerent and dangerous behaviour of the DPRK. The threat posed by the DPRK’s programmes to both regional and international security will continue to be at the forefront of our work.

As the United Kingdom has done on many occasions, we continue to urge the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to return to credible and authentic multilateral talks on its nuclear programme. We ask it to abide by its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and to permit full access by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

[HCWS355]
Written Statements

Thursday 15 December 2016

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Royal BBC Charter and Framework Agreement

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): On 9 November 2016, my Department submitted a draft version of a royal charter for the continuance of the BBC to Privy Council for consideration.

I am pleased to announce today, that the royal charter for the continuance of the BBC, which was approved by Her Majesty in Council on 16 November 2016, was printed on vellum and sealed on 8 December 2016.

I am laying copies of the royal charter and the associated framework agreement in both Houses today.

[HCWS358]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Covenant

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): I am today laying before both Houses the 2016 armed forces covenant annual report. The covenant is a promise by the nation to ensure that those who serve, or have served, and their families are treated fairly. They protect the nation with honour, courage and commitment, and deserve to be treated with fairness and respect and suffer no disadvantage as a result of that service.

The report sets out what the Government have done to uphold the principles of the covenant. The Armed Forces Act 2011 enshrined the covenant into law, setting out the requirement for the Secretary of State for Defence to report progress annually to Parliament.

Every local authority in mainland Great Britain is continuing to provide a network of support for the armed forces community. Over 1,300 employers have now also signed up.

This year, in response to feedback from our people, particular emphasis has been given to improving access to commercial goods and services; ensuring healthcare, education, and accommodation; and improving communications about the covenant.

A total of 89% of the UK’s motor industry has agreed that service personnel and their families will not face cancellation fees for suspending their cover when posted overseas, and they will be able to preserve their no claims discount for up to three years. NHS England launched a new veterans’ trauma network, aimed at providing a safety net for trauma-recovering veterans and service personnel transitioning back into civilian life. In addition to the service pupil premium, the Ministry of Defence has allocated £6 million of funding from its education support fund to help 471 schools, with over 25,000 children from service families. We continue to help our people to get on and stay on the property ladder, through the forces help to buy scheme, which we have extended to 2018. A total of 11,645 service personnel have had their applications approved. We have also created a cohort of over 150 covenant champions across the armed forces to act as local focal points within their communities.

Last year, we announced the launch of the new £10 million per annum covenant fund. Since then, it has funded nearly 300 large and small projects across the UK, totalling nearly £12 million, to provide support to the armed forces community. We have committed £2 million to provide a single point of contact to help veterans towards appropriate support when and where they need it.

The Local Government Association, in partnership with the Forces in Mind Trust completed a review with over 400 representatives of local authorities to create a covenant toolkit. This will help to spread covenant delivery best practice across the United Kingdom.

A new inter-ministerial group for the armed forces covenant will be established in the new year.

The report has been compiled in consultation with other Government Departments, representatives from the devolved Governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the external members of the Covenant Reference Group, which includes the three service families federations, the Confederation of Service Charities, the Royal British Legion, the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association, the War Widows Association and Professor Hew Strachan.

[HCWS366]

Strategic Defence and Security Review: Army

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): The Army is refining its force structure to deliver the capabilities set out in the strategic defence and security review (SDSR) 2015 and modernise the Army’s ability to fight at the divisional level. The SDSR 2015 significantly increased the readiness levels required of the Army, underpinned by investment in new capability and a war-fighting division as part of joint force 2025. It introduced the innovative strike brigades, based on the new AJAX vehicle family and the development of specialised infantry battalions, reconfigured to provide an increased contribution to countering terrorism and building stability overseas.

I am today setting out refinements to the Army which will take place during the life of this Parliament. These have been aligned with the “Better Defence Estate” strategy announced in early November. As we previously committed, we will continue to sustain a regular Army of 82,000, a whole force of 112,000 regular and reserve troops and the Army’s footprint in the devolved nations. All existing regimental cap badges will be retained. Large parts of the Army will be unaffected but it will involve some units changing their role, equipment or location.

A modernised division will be centred on the 3rd (UK) Division, organised with four brigades of two armoured infantry and two strike, rather than three armoured infantry as now. A significant uplift in capability, it will hold one of each at high readiness, rather than the
current single armoured infantry brigade. From this, in times of crisis, the Army will be able to deploy a credible division of three brigades. To develop and transition to this new posture, in 2017 the Army will launch a strike experimentation group in Warminster. This will ensure that the first new strike brigade will be formed by the end of the decade.

In 2017 the Army will also create the first two new specialised infantry battalions to pioneer this new capability. A new group headquarters for the units will be established, initially based in York alongside the 1st (UK) Division of which the group will be part, before moving to Aldershot by 2020. To reinforce this capability the Army plans to create two further specialised infantry battalions by 2019. They will conduct defence engagement and capacity building, providing training, assistance, advice and mentoring to our partners.

As part of our continued investment in the Army Reserve we will build on the success of the Future Reserves 2020 plan. We will optimise reserve structures, embed the successful pairing of regular and reserve units and increase the number of reserve combat units supporting the division. As a result two new reserve infantry battalions will be created from 2017. A new reserve explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) regiment will also be created.

A summary of the Army units most affected is described below.

**Summary of changes proposed under Army 2020 Refine Strike Brigade**

The first strike brigade will operate from Catterick and Salisbury plain and will be composed of the Household Cavalry Regiment, The King's Royal Hussars, the 1st Battalion Scots Guards and The Highlanders, 4th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland. A number of Royal Logistic Corps (RLC) and Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineer (REME) units will be allocated to provide close support logistic support, beginning with 1 Regiment RLC and 1 Close Support Battalion REME.

**Specialised Infantry Battalions**

In 2017 the Army will also create the first two new specialised infantry battalions to pioneer this new capability. These units will be The Royal Scots Borderers, 1st Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland and 4th Battalion The Rifles, the former relocating to Aldershot from Belfast by 2019. A new group headquarters for the units will be established, initially based in York alongside the 1st (UK) Division of which the group will be part, before moving to Aldershot by 2020. To reinforce this capability the Army plans to create two further specialised infantry battalions by 2019. These units will be the 2nd Battalion The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment and the 2nd Battalion The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment both joining the group in Aldershot by 2020.

**Renaming of administrative structures**

The introduction of the specialised infantry capability will mean some reorganisation of the infantry divisional structure, within which infantry regiments are administered, from seven to six divisions.

The Scottish and The Prince of Wales's Administrative Divisions of Infantry will merge, incorporating The Royal Regiment of Scotland, The Royal Welsh Regiment and The Royal Irish Regiment. This administrative division will be called The Scottish, Welsh and Irish Division. The Mercian Regiment from the Prince of Wales's Division will join with the King's Division. Army administrative divisions of infantry are the groupings within which the Army manages its infantry soldiers and officers to give them the necessary broad spread of relevant career experience from across a number of different units and activities. They have no operational role. There will be no changes to the names or regimental construct of The Royal Regiment of Scotland, The Mercian Regiment, The Royal Welsh Regiment, or The Royal Irish Regiment as a result of these administrative changes.

**Support**

The changes announced will require adjustments in some supporting and enabling elements of the Army. HQ 102 Logistic Brigade, 32nd Regiment Royal Artillery, 35 Engineer Regiment, Headquarters 64 Works Group Royal Engineers, 2 Medical Regiment, Headquarters 4th Regiment Royal Military Police, 33 Field Hospital and 104,105 and 106 Battalions of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers reserve will be rationalised, with all manpower in those units being redeployed to other areas of the Army in its refined structure.

**Army Reserves**

As part of our continued investment in the Army Reserve we will build on the success of the Future Reserves 2020 plan. We will optimise reserve structures to better support the modernised division, embed the successful pairing of regular and reserve units and increase the number of reserve combat units supporting the division. As a result, two new reserve infantry battalions will be created from 2017. These are 4th Battalion The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment and 8th Battalion The Rifles. A new reserve explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) regiment will also be created.

**ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**

**EU Environment Council**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I will attend the EU Environment Council, which will take place on 19 December in Brussels alongside the Minister for Climate Change and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruismil, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd).

Following adoption of the agenda, the list of “A” items will be approved.

Under legislative proposals, the Council will debate a proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending directive 2003/87/EC (the “EU ETS directive”) to enhance cost-effective emission reductions and low-carbon investments.

Under non-legislative proposals, the Council will seek to adopt conclusions on the protection of human health and the environment through the sound management of chemicals.

The following items will be discussed under any other business:

a) Current legislative proposals:
i) Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on binding annual greenhouse gas emission reductions by member states from 2021 to 2030 for a resilient energy union and to meet commitments under the Paris agreement and amending regulation No 525/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council on a mechanism for monitoring and reporting greenhouse gas emissions and other information relevant to climate change (the “effort share regulation”).

ii) Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the inclusion of greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, land use change and forestry into the 2030 climate and energy framework and amending regulation No 525/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council on a mechanism for monitoring and reporting greenhouse gas emissions and other information relevant to climate change (the “land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) regulation”).

b) Current legislative proposals:


c) Communication from the Commission on next steps for a sustainable European future: European action for sustainability.

d) Communication from the Commission on clean energy for all Europeans.

e) Fitness check of the EU nature legislation (birds and habitats directives).

f) Reports on recent international meetings:

i) United Nations framework convention on climate change (UNFCCC) (Marrakech, 7 to 18 November 2016).

ii) Convention on biological diversity (CBD) (Cancun, 4 to 17 December 2016).

iii) 66th session of the International Whaling Commission (Portoroz, Slovenia, 20 to 28 October 2016).

iv) Ninth meeting of the conference of the parties (COP 9) to the UNECE convention on transboundary effects of industrial accidents (Ljubljana, 28 to 30 November 2016).

g) REFIT evaluation of the EU ecolabel.

h) European sustainable development week (ESDW) (30 May to 5 June 2017).

i) Odour nuisance.

j) Budapest Water summit 2016 (Budapest, 28 to 30 November 2016).

k) Work programme of the incoming presidency.

On 23 June, the EU referendum took place and the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Until exit negotiations are concluded, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. During this period the Government will continue to negotiate, implement and apply EU legislation. The outcome of these negotiations will determine what arrangements apply in relation to EU legislation in future once the UK has left the EU.

[HCWS359]
Full details of the public health grants to local authorities can be found on www.gov.uk. This information will be communicated to local authorities.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

HOME DEPARTMENT

Bribery and Corruption Assessment

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): I, along with the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), am today publishing a bribery and corruption assessment template. We are writing to all central Government Departments encouraging them to use the template to set a high standard within Government of our response to bribery and corruption.

No sector is immune to bribery and corruption. Central Government and those they do business with are vulnerable to this threat due to their unique decision-making roles and access to information. To better protect themselves from bribery and corruption, a comprehensive understanding of the unique set of risks posed is essential in order to effectively manage and mitigate the threat.

The template directly supports this ambition.

We have therefore worked closely with experts and stakeholders across Government to develop this template, which is intended to be integrated into existing counter-fraud activity and the work across Government, led by the Cabinet Office, to create standards for counter-fraud work and, from these standards, a Government counter-fraud profession.

Development and publication of the template was a commitment made in the 2014 UK anti-corruption plan. The UK Government are committed to tackling corruption through transparency, open government and accountability, and setting a high standard in Government for counter-corruption work is also aligned to our wider ambitions that will be reflected in our development of an anti-corruption strategy.

A copy of the bribery and corruption assessment template will be placed in the Library of the House and also made available on the Government website: www.gov.uk.

EURODAC

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Government have decided to opt in to the EU proposal for the EURODAC III regulation.

The regulation will govern the operation of the EURODAC fingerprint database, which holds the fingerprints of asylum seekers and certain illegal entrants to the EU, in order to help member states determine who is responsible under the Dublin regulation for dealing with an asylum claim and to tackle illegal migration.

The EURODAC database will be expanded to increase the categories of fingerprints recorded, to record facial images and biographical data, to increase the length of time data can be stored to five years and to provide better data-sharing procedures between member states. These changes will strengthen the UK’s ability to control illegal migration, prevent multiple asylum applications across member states and protect the UK’s security through data sharing with law enforcement agencies.

Until the UK leaves the EU it remains a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK’s right to opt in to forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our security, protecting our civil liberties and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

Justice and Home Affairs: Post-Council Statement

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): The final Justice and Home Affairs Council of the Slovakian presidency took place on 8 and 9 December in Brussels. The Minister for Courts and Justice, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), and I represented the UK. In due course, the United Kingdom will be leaving the European Union. In the meantime, the UK will remain a member of the EU with all the rights and obligations that membership entails.

Justice day (8 December) began with a discussion on the proposal for a directive on the fight against fraud to the Union’s financial interests by means of criminal law (PIF directive). The UK has not opted in to this measure. The presidency concluded that a qualified majority of member states supported a compromise proposal which included within the scope of the directive VAT fraud with damages of over €10 million, where it related to cross-border supplies between two or more countries.

Formal adoption of the measure by the Council and European Parliament is expected in 2017.

This was followed by a debate on the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO) dossier. The presidency concluded that the majority of member states supported the latest text as the basis for further progress. However, as unanimity is required for this dossier, and some member states could not agree the current text, the presidency indicated that it would be put to the European Council to seek agreement to move forward under “enhanced co-operation” provisions. The UK will not participate in the EPPO.

There was then a discussion on the proposed directive on consumer contractual rights for the supply of digital content. There was agreement that certain contractual rights should be guaranteed by legislation rather than left to negotiation in individual contracts, but Ministers remained divided on issues relating to the scope of the directive. In view of the different views expressed, the presidency proposed seeking a hybrid solution to the question of which contractual rights should apply to digital content embedded in physical goods. The presidency concluded that further technical work was needed on the question of whether the directive should...
apply not only to digital content in exchange for money and/or personal data, but in exchange for other data as well.

Over lunch, Ministers heard from the Commission about the progress of work to agree non-binding standards with internet groups in the management of hate speech complaints. The Minister for Courts and Justice reiterated the UK’s commitment to protect citizens from online hate crime while protecting the right to free speech. Malta, who will hold the presidency from January 2017, informed Ministers that it proposed to hold a seminar on hate speech and the internet in March.

The final substantive item on the Justice day focused on criminal justice in cyberspace. The Commission provided a progress report on the implementation of the June Council conclusions on improving criminal justice in cyberspace, noting that it was looking at establishing a secure electronic platform for the transmission of e-evidence. It was noted that the current patchwork of national solutions to securing e-evidence posed risks to member states’ ability to carry out effective criminal investigations in cross-border cases.

I stressed the need to address online crime and the importance of collaborating with service providers and other member states. I offered to share UK knowledge and expertise on co-operating directly with service providers, noting recent UK legislation (the Investigatory Powers Act) in this area, while arguing that a common EU approach to jurisdiction should reflect the ongoing work in the Council of Europe on the Budapest convention on cybercrime.

Under any other business, Malta presented its priorities for its forthcoming presidency, including taking forward existing legislation and starting negotiations on the package of measures aimed at tackling terrorist financing, which are to be published by the Commission in December. Malta would also continue the work on e-evidence and the EPPO, with a discussion at the Informal JHA Council in January.

The presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals, noting that political agreement had been achieved on the counter-terrorism directive. The presidency also provided updates on the recent EU-US JHA meeting, and the forthcoming EU-western Balkans ministerial conference. The President of Eurojust presented Eurojust’s fourth report on foreign terrorist fighters.

Interior day (9 December) started with an update from the presidency on negotiations on the proposals for an entry/exit system to improve the security of the external Schengen border. The UK will not participate in this measure but supports its aim of securing the EU’s external border.

This was followed by a substantial discussion on migration. Discussion focused on calls for more support to the EU migration agencies and front-line member states, as well as for more work to be done upstream with countries of origin and transit.

I announced that the UK would deploy up to an additional 40 staff to the Greek islands, in addition to the 75 staff already committed, to support the Greek authorities with asylum processing and the admissibility process. This action demonstrates the UK’s continuing commitment to implementing the EU-Turkey agreement and supporting our European partners.

Under the fight against terrorism item the Council discussed action that was necessary to tackle the threat from foreign terrorist fighters, informed by a report provided by the counter-terrorism co-ordinator. Discussion focused on the need for better information sharing, improved engagement with countries in the middle east and north Africa, and women and children. The counter-terrorism co-ordinator said that he would continue to work on these three strands with the group of most affected member states, which includes the UK.

The Council also discussed issues arising from encryption of communications, focused on the need to ensure that law enforcement bodies are able to access information for law enforcement purposes. I noted that while the UK understands that encryption is important to doing business online, we agree that we must ensure that our law enforcement and security and intelligence agencies are able to access the content of communications in limited circumstances and subject to robust safeguards.

The presidency presented a paper on the management of terrorist attacks, which aimed to start discussions among member states on increased co-operation in this area. The presidency called for more EU funding and stated that a meeting with the heads of rescue services would take place in 2017. The Commission noted that action was needed on sharing best practice, enhancing technology and providing victims with specific support.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed principles of responsibility and solidarity in the context of the EU’s migration and asylum policy. Member states’ positions remained polarised and discussions would continue under the Maltese presidency.

The presidency adopted a partial general approach on the proposal to amend EURODAC (the database of asylum claimants’ details, including fingerprints) on the understanding it would need further amendments to reflect the outcome of negotiations on the Dublin IV and EU asylum agency proposals. The mandate would also be updated in the light of the discussions on the issue of interoperability of information systems. The UK has opted in to the EURODAC proposal and it remains under UK parliamentary scrutiny. I also intervened with other member states to object to the current text on law enforcement access and said that the UK would support further amendments to the text to make it easier to check EURODAC for law enforcement purposes.

Under any other business, the presidency updated on the EU-US JHA ministerial meeting on 4 and 5 December, and looked forward to the EU-western Balkans ministerial conference on 15 and 16 December. The Commission noted that the EU internet forum on 8 December had announced a new tool to automatically remove online terrorist material, and launched the civil society empowerment programme to raise awareness and train civil society on how to produce effective counter-narratives online. The incoming presidency outlined its priorities, including: work on the current legislative measures; new proposals on the second generation Schengen information system, due out in December; continued work to support the implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement; internal security and counter-terrorism; and interoperability and information exchange.

[HCWS365]
Police Grant Report (England and Wales)

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I have today placed in the Library my proposals for the aggregate amount of grant to local policing bodies in England and Wales for 2017-18, for the approval of the House. Copies are also available in the Vote Office.

The Government are committed to protecting the public. The Government will provide the resources necessary for the police to do their critical work, and prioritise finishing the job of police reform by enabling the police to transform so they can tackle changing crime, deal with previously hidden crimes and protect the vulnerable.

Since 2010 we have seen some of the biggest changes to policing in a generation. Crime is down by over a quarter according to the independent crime survey for England and Wales. There is significantly greater local accountability and transparency and police leaders have taken the opportunity to radically reform the way they deliver services to the public. Police officers have been taken out of back-office roles and resources focused on front-line delivery. Police forces are working more closely than ever before to reduce costs and duplication, and have started to work more closely with other emergency services through co-location and collaboration in areas such as fire and mental health.

As Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary (HMIC) has set out, there is still considerable scope for forces to continue to improve the efficiency of their organisations and transform the way in which they operate, and it is vital that the pace and urgency of change continues if we are to have a police force fit to meet the challenges of the 21st century. HMIC noted: “we found evidence to suggest that some forces have reduced the pace and ambition of their plans since last year.”

The Government expect police and crime commissioners (PCCs) and chief constables to do everything in their power to drive efficiencies at pace, and this settlement provides the opportunity to improve the quality of policing and continue to reduce crime.

The Welsh Government are also setting out today their proposals for the allocation of funding in 2017-18 for local policing bodies in Wales.

Following the principles set out on 4 February 2016 when publishing the final police funding settlement for 2016-17 [HCWS510], direct resource funding for each PCC, including precept, will be protected at flat cash levels compared to 2015-16, assuming that precept income is increased to the maximum amount available in both 2016-17 and 2017-18. No PCC who chooses to maximise precept in both years will face a reduction in cash funding next year compared to 2015-16. We have updated our precept forecasts for 2017-18 since February to reflect actual tax base increases in 2016-17.

More is still required to transform policing to meet policing’s own vision for 2025. I am therefore announcing an increase in the level of reallocations essential to drive police reform. As planned at the time of the spending review, we will be investing additional funding in police technology. Precept income has increased faster than expected, which means we can meet our planning assumption on direct resource funding for PCCs and also substantially increase the size of the police transformation fund to £175 million in 2017-18. This will allow the policing sector to invest additional funding in the projects that will improve efficiency, protect vulnerable victims of crime, further improve the leadership and culture of policing and tackle new types of crime such as cybercrime.

The 2017-18 settlement continues the current methodology of applying uniform percentage changes to core grant funding for each PCC.

The tables illustrating how we propose to allocate the police funding settlement between the different funding streams and between local policing bodies for 2017-18 are available online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-12-15/HCWS360/.

These documents are intended to be read together.

Table 1 sets out the overall revenue police funding settlement for 2017-18, and table 2 sets out the overall capital settlement (both excluding counter-terrorism police grant). Provisional force-level allocations of revenue grants (excluding counter-terrorism police grant) for local policing bodies in England and Wales for 2017-18 are set out in table 3, and table 4 sets out the capital allocations for local policing bodies. Table 5 demonstrates how the Government expect that all PCCs can maintain flat cash budgets compared to 2015-16 if they maximise precept; the exception is where they have materially reduced their precept level in 2016-17.

Counter-terrorism police funding

I will continue to allocate specific funding for counter-terrorism policing over the course of the spending review period to ensure that the police have the capabilities to deal with the terrorist threats that we face, in addition to the funding set out in this settlement. Funding for counter-terrorism policing is protected. The indicative spending review profile for counter-terrorism police funding in 2017-18 is £670 million; this figure will be confirmed separately. In addition a further £32 million will be provided for armed policing from the police transformation fund in 2017-18.

Police and crime commissioners will receive full counter-terrorism funding allocations in the new year. For security reasons these allocations will not be available in the public domain.

Legacy council tax grants

In 2017-18 we will provide council tax freeze grants to PCCs in England relating to the 2011-12, 2013-14, 2014-15 and 2015-16 council tax freeze schemes. We will also provide local council tax support grant funding to PCCs in England. These will total £507 million in 2017-18.

The Common Council of the City of London (on behalf of the City of London Police) and the Greater London Authority (on behalf of the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime) will also receive council tax freeze grants relating to the 2011-12 freeze grant scheme. The Greater London Authority will also receive an amount for the 2013-14, 2014-15 and 2015-16 schemes. These sums will continue to be paid by DCLG. There will be no new freeze grant schemes in 2017-18.

Baseline adjustments and reallocations

The Government have reallocated funding to support critical national priorities for policing.
National and international capital city grants

The Metropolitan Police Service, through the Greater London Authority, will continue to receive national and international capital city (NICC) grant funding worth £173.6 million, and the City of London Police will also continue to receive NICC funding worth £4.5 million. This is in recognition of the unique and additional demands of policing the capital city, and also ensures that total direct resource funding to both forces is similarly protected.

Police transformation fund

Total funding for transformation will increase in size to £175 million, an increase of over £40 million. The Government will be working with the Police Reform and Transformation Board to ensure a sector-led approach to use this increase in funding in order to incentivise and facilitate transformation in policing. This will improve the leadership and culture of policing, the diversity of its workforce, protection of vulnerable people, cross-force specialist capabilities, exploitation of new technology and how we respond to changing threats.

We will continue to fund a national uplift in armed policing capability and capacity to respond more quickly and effectively to a firearms attack with £32 million of specific funding. We will also continue to fund current police innovation fund projects.

Police technology programmes

Funding will continue to be reallocated for the new emergency services network (ESN), the existing Airwave system, Home Office biometrics and the national law enforcement police database. As planned at the time of the spending review, there will be an approximately £100 million increase in funding for ESN. This is critical to give all officers priority access to 4G mobile broadband data on a single network, including in some areas where it is currently not available at all, allowing them to get even more benefits from mobile working than many forces are already achieving. This investment will bring productivity and operational benefits as well as substantial savings to the taxpayer. Funding for major technology programmes will be managed flexibly between projects, to ensure reallocated funding is used as efficiently as possible. Around £1 million will be spent maintaining the forensic archive, which maintains forensic exhibits relating to criminal investigations on behalf of the police.

Arm’s length bodies

The police settlement will continue to fund national policing bodies to deliver services and governance which are essential to the efficient and successful functioning of the police service. We will continue to fund HMIC’s PEEL inspection programme, and the College of Policing direct entry schemes. There will be increased funding to support the Independent Police Complaints Commission as it becomes the Independent Office for Police Conduct with an expanded role in investigating serious and sensitive allegations involving the police, enabling it to implement the legislative reforms in the Policing and Crime Bill and enhancing its capability to handle complex major investigations.

A new reallocation of around £2 million will support the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) to use new police-style enforcement powers set out in the Immigration Act 2016 to tackle labour exploitation including modern slavery across the economy. Through greater resources to use these new powers, the GLAA will be able to undertake more investigations into modern slavery offences that might otherwise fall to the police, saving police time and improving the law enforcement response to exploitation of the most vulnerable workers.

Pre-charge bail

The Government plan to implement significant reforms to pre-charge bail including time limits set out in the Policing and Crime Bill. We will end the situation where some people can spend months or even years on pre-charge bail with few or no safeguards by introducing: a presumption that suspects will be released without bail, regular reviews by the courts and formal guidance governing the imposition of conditions. This change in police practice may involve increased costs for the magistrates’ courts and in legal aid, which a new reallocation of up to £15 million for 2017-18 will meet.

Strengthening the response to organised crime

The National Crime Agency (NCA) and regional organised crime units will receive flat cash resource grants from the Home Office compared to 2015-16, in line with the approach taken to funding PCCs. This involves an adjustment to the police funding settlement to top up these grants, continuing the approach taken to NCA in 2016-17.

Police special grant including Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting policing

This is the third year we have decided to provide funding from the police settlement for the discretionary police special grant contingency fund, which supports police force areas facing significant and exceptional events which might otherwise place them at significant financial risk. In 2017-18 I am providing £50 million from the police settlement for police special grant. This is an increase which reflects both an assessment of potential need across police forces, and the specific costs likely to be incurred preparing for the policing operation at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 2018.

Council tax referendum principles

As in 2016-17, additional flexibility will be given to the 10 PCCs in England with the lowest precept bills (the lower quartile). The PCCs with the 10 lowest bills will be able to raise their precept by £5 per band D household. Other PCCs in England will receive a 2% referendum threshold.

The PCCs to receive the £5 flexibility in 2017-18 are Essex, Greater Manchester, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Kent, Northumbria, South Yorkshire, Sussex, West Midlands and West Yorkshire.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government is announcing today the council tax referendum principles for local authorities in England in 2017-18. After considering any representations, he will set out the final principles in a report to the House and seek approval for these in parallel with the final local Government finance report. Council tax in Wales is the responsibility of Welsh Ministers.

Police capital

I still intend to allocate the majority of capital funding directly to local policing bodies. Like last year all local policing bodies will receive the same percentage change in capital grant. I will continue to maintain a capital contingency. An increased investment in police technology
reflects a programme of work to replace end-of-life hardware, increase capacity, and enhance functionality including significant investment to replace of end-of-life hardware required for the police national computer.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-12-15/HCWS360/

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

| TPIM notices in force (as of 30 November 2016) | 7 |
| TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 30 November 2016) | 6 |
| TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period) | 0 |
| TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period) | 0 |
| TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period) | 0 |
| Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period) | 4 |
| Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period) | 1 |
| The number of current subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (as of 30 November 2016) | 7 |

The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The TRG met on 20, 27 and 28 September 2016. The next TRG meetings will take place on 12, 13, 15 and 16 December 2016.

During the reporting period one individual was prosecuted in relation to offences under section 23 of the Act (contravening a measure specified in a TPIM notice without reasonable excuse) and sentenced to 20 months' imprisonment. This individual is not currently subject to a TPIM notice, the notice having been previously revoked.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council met on 8 December 2016 in Brussels. The Minister for Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), represented the UK.

The Council reached a general approach on the revision of the governing regulations of the Eurofound, EU-OSHA and CEDEFOP agencies. The UK, along with all member states and the Commission, supported the proposal.

The presidency provided a progress report on the revision of the posting of workers directive. There were interventions from 22 member states. The UK intervention stressed the importance of legal clarity so that workers understood their rights and businesses understood the rules. The presidency also provided progress reports on the European Accessibility Act and the equal treatment directive.

There was a policy debate on the European pillar of social rights. The UK intervention stressed the need to respect subsidiarity and member states' own labour market approaches. The UK welcomed the Commission's communication that the social pillar should include flexibility about participation for non-eurozone countries. This was followed by a lunch time discussion on social innovation where the UK outlined its experience with social investment.

The Commission presented analysis from the European Semester which was followed by an exchange of views on the European Semester. Ministers also considered the draft recommendations for the eurozone countries. The UK welcomed the Commission's findings and the priorities identified for the year ahead.

The Council adopted draft Council conclusions on accelerating the process of Roma integration, women and poverty, and the youth guarantee and youth employment initiative. The Commission also introduced the European solidarity corps, launched earlier that week.

Under any other business, the Swedish and German delegations called on the Commission to upgrade the status of its gender equality strategy, the presidency provided an update on omnibus regulations and the new skills agenda for Europe, and the Austrian delegation provided an update on the Special Olympics world winter games. The presidency presented the outcome of conferences organised during their presidency and the Maltese delegation presented their work programme for their presidency.
Written Statements

Friday 16 December 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Governance Code on Public Appointments

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): On 2 July 2015, the then Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), announced that the Government had asked Sir Gerry Grimstone to lead a review of the operation of the public appointments system. The completion of the review was announced on 11 March 2016, Official Report, column 27WS, HCWS609.

Sir Gerry Grimstone’s review placed an emphasis on the original conclusions reached by Lord Nolan in 1995 that Ministers should be at the heart of the public appointments system and concluded that Lord Nolan’s principles have stood the test of time and are as applicable today as they were 20 years ago. The review also recommended a new principle of diversity and also a greater emphasis on transparency throughout the system.

The Government welcomed Sir Gerry’s review and announced that they would implement its recommendations, including the publication of a new public appointments governance code, which I am publishing today. The new code will come into force in January.

The new code sets out that:

- public appointments should be run in accordance to a set of principles: Ministerial responsibility, selflessness, integrity, merit, openness, diversity, assurance, fairness;
- Ministers are responsible for public appointments and are central to the decision-making process;
- the Commissioner for Public Appointments has a vital function regulating public appointments.

The Commissioner retains responsibility for monitoring and auditing appointments processes, but will not be directly involved in competitions; and

processes will be streamlined of bureaucracy with a stronger focus on customer care and transparency to ensure public confidence.

There will be an emphasis on diversity in appointments.

The public appointments governance code can be found on the gov.uk website and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. [HCWS368]

DEFENCE

Independent Medical Expert Group: Triennial Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): I am today announcing the conclusion of the triennial review of the Independent Medical Expert Group. Reviews are part of the Government’s commitment to ensuring that Non Departmental Public Bodies continue to have regular independent challenge.

I am placing copy of the report in the Library of the House and it will be published on the www.gov.uk website.

The review examined whether there is a continuing need for the Independent Medical Expert Group’s function and its form, and whether it should continue to exist at arm’s length from Government.

The review found that the Independent Medical Expert Group provides valuable, high quality, well-respected medical and scientific advice to Ministers. The function the Independent Medical Expert Group fulfils continues to play an important role in ensuring that the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme relies on credible, up-to-date evidence, and is also perceived to do so by those who apply to it. Retaining the Independent Medical Expert Group as a Non Departmental Public Body remains the most appropriate option.

The review also confirmed that the Independent Medical Expert Group complies with the principles of good corporate governance and with the Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees and the Principles of Scientific advice to Government.

The outcome of this review is welcomed and demonstrates the effectiveness of the Independent Medical Expert Group as highly-regarded, independent experts whose function helps to maintain the medical and scientific integrity of the awards made under the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme. [HCWS371]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): Today I am updating the House on the implementation of the Government’s 25-year strategy to eradicate bovine TB in England.

The strategy continues to deliver results. Next year we will apply for officially TB free status in the low risk area of the country where there is no significant TB in wildlife. This will boost trade opportunities and mean some herds require less regular TB testing, reducing costs for farmers and taxpayers. Bovine TB remains the greatest animal health threat to the UK. Dealing with the disease is costing the taxpayer over £100 million each year. Last year alone over 28,000 cattle had to be slaughtered in England to control the disease, causing devastation and distress for hard-working farmers and rural communities.

The Government are taking strong action to deliver a long-term plan to eradicate the disease and protect the future of our dairy and beef industries. The comprehensive strategy includes strengthening cattle testing and movement controls, improving biosecurity on farm and when trading, and badger control in areas where TB is rife.

There is broad scientific consensus that badgers are implicated in the spread of TB to cattle in the high risk area of England, which also has the highest badger density in Europe and has seen a large increase in badger abundance over the last 20 years. The approach of tackling the disease simultaneously in cattle and in wildlife has worked in Australia, is working in New Zealand and Ireland and is supported by the Government and DEFRA Chief Scientists, the UK Chief Vet and other leading vets.
This year seven new and three existing licensed badger control operations were delivered by local farmers and landowners in parts of Somerset, Herefordshire, Gloucestershire, Cornwall, Devon and Dorset. These areas comprise 10% of the high risk area, and all achieved successful outcomes. As part of our 25 year bovine TB eradication strategy I want to see further expansion of operations in the coming years. This is in line with the UK Chief Veterinary Officer’s advice on what is needed to realise and maintain disease control benefits at regional level.

I have also today published a consultation on the next steps in areas that have completed the first four years of badger control. I am proposing to allow continued, strictly licensed, activity to stabilise the population at the reduced level. This will ensure the disease reduction benefits in cattle are prolonged for many years to come.

Following consultation earlier this year, the Government intend to make further improvements to TB testing in the high risk and edge areas of England and to introduce new arrangements for controlling the disease in non-bovines. Tough controls on cattle and non-bovine farm animals are an essential complement to controlling the disease in wildlife and our plans published today alongside our summary of consultation responses will help us to make further progress on the disease, while not overburdening our livestock industry.

Effective biosecurity is essential to protect the gains from reinforced cattle controls and badger control so I very much welcome the progress being made in delivering a joint government- industry TB biosecurity action plan. I am pleased that last month’s launch of a new bovine TB herd accreditation programme by the Cattle Health Certification Standards body has started to attract herd owners keen to be recognised and rewarded for good biosecurity practices. We will consult next year on proposed incentives to encourage more herd owners to take up this option.

Innovations enabling our farmers to better protect their herds include access to advice on the TB hub, our interactive map of TB locations and the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board’s list of dairy bulls with greater genetic resistance to TB, alongside farm demonstration events, accredited training for vets and new teaching and training resources for land-based colleges.

Although it does not provide complete protection or cure infected animals which continue to spread TB, badger vaccination has a role to play. We remain committed to promoting vaccination in the edge area of England albeit deployment continues to be hampered by a global shortage, meaning deliveries of the authorised vaccine are not expected to resume before 2018. We will start work next year with interested organisations on the design of a new Badger Edge Vaccination Scheme (BEVS) as a replacement to the former scheme which had to be cancelled because of the lack of vaccine.

In the meantime, supplies of vaccine for human immunisation will continue to be prioritised.

To ensure we have a successful and resilient industry as the UK enters a new trading relationship with the world, we are determined to implement all available measures necessary to eradicate this devastating disease as quickly as possible.

Copies of the badger control consultation and the cattle and non-bovine summary of consultation responses are available in the Libraries of the House.

HOME DEPARTMENT

European Union Opt In Decision: Asylum Measures

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):
The Government have decided not to opt in to the new EU proposals for a Qualification regulation, an Asylum Procedures regulation and a recast Reception Conditions Directive. The proposals reform the package of asylum directives adopted between 2011-2013 as part of the second phase of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS).

The UK chose not to participate in the corresponding second phase CEAS instruments due to concerns over the limits they would place on our national system. As a result the UK remains bound by the directives adopted as part of the first phase of the CEAS: the Reception Conditions Directive 2003/9/EC; the Qualification Directive 2004/83/EC; and the Asylum Procedures Directive 2005/85/EC. These directives established minimum standards and allowed member states a large degree of flexibility in implementation.

There is some merit in the new proposals, for example the overarching aim of discouraging abuse and unwarranted secondary movements. However, the Government’s view is that decisions on asylum systems are best taken at national level. The proposals, in particular where replacing the use of a Directive with a regulation in the case of the proposals on Qualification and Asylum Procedures, would further limit the Government’s ability to take decisions on the UK asylum system at national level and in the UK national interest. There is no reason to change the approach from that taken with regard to the corresponding second phase CEAS measures. Therefore, the UK will not opt in to the proposals.

Until the UK leaves the EU, it remains a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK’s right to opt in to forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case by case basis, with a view to maximising our country’s security, protecting our civil liberties and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

European Union Opt in Decision: Dublin IV Regulation

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):
The Government have decided not to opt in to the EU proposal for the Dublin IV regulation.

The regulation will govern the process of deciding which member state is responsible for deciding an asylum claim and streamline the transfer process. The UK supports those aims, but the proposed Dublin IV regulation binds member states to participate in a quota-based distribution scheme. The proposal also permits the
Commission to impose considerable financial burdens on member states, of €250,000 per applicant not transferred under this mechanism.

The UK has long-standing reservations about such relocation schemes. Asylum seekers should claim asylum in the first safe country they enter and not be moved around the EU using allocation quotas.

By not opting in to Dublin IV regulation, the UK remains bound by the Dublin III regulation, which will allow the Government to return applicants where another member state is responsible for determining their asylum claim and discourage secondary movement or so-called “asylum shopping”.

Until the UK leaves the EU, it remains a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK’s right to opt in to forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country’s security, protecting our civil liberties and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

[HCWS370]

European Union Opt In Decision: EU Agency for Asylum

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):
The Government have decided not to opt in to the EU proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Union Agency for Asylum.


The aim of the proposal is an agency with more powers to promote the implementation and improve the functioning of the Common European Asylum System. The proposal provides the European Union Agency for Asylum with a significant degree of oversight over national asylum systems.

We are committed to running a high quality and effective asylum system but have always taken the view that the functioning of the asylum system is a sovereign matter.

The UK will therefore not opt in to the proposal for the EU Agency for Asylum.

[HCWS373]

European Union Opt in Decision: EU Readmission Agreement with Nigeria

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):
The Government have decided not to opt in to a Council Decision (11975/16/16) authorising the opening of negotiations on an agreement between the European Union and Nigeria on readmission.

EU readmission agreements (EURAs) ensure reciprocal procedures for the identification, documentation and return of persons illegally entering or remaining in EU member states, or the third country. We decide whether to participate in EURAs on a case-by-case basis, depending on the priority we attach to the country concerned in terms of numbers of immigration returns and the degree to which we enjoy a good bilateral relationship with that country.

In terms of returns co-operation, the UK already has bilateral arrangements with Nigeria via a memorandum of understanding, which work well, for example allowing the return of Nigerian nationals who have an expired passport. In 2015, there were 599 enforced removals to Nigeria and 1,361 voluntary removals.

We would not envisage an operational advantage if we were to change our current bilateral arrangements for conducting returns to Nigeria.

[HCWS369]

European Union Opt In Decision: Residence Permits (Third Country Nationals)

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):
The Government have decided not to opt in to the draft Council regulation amending the regulation on the uniform format for residence permits for third country nationals. The proposed regulation is intended to update the 2002 regulation, which was previously amended in 2008. The draft measure seeks to update the design and security features on the current version of the residence permit.

In reaching its decision, although the Government welcome measures that will strengthen immigration and border control, it has taken account of the cost of developing a document that the UK may never use. The UK will continue issuing the current format of the residence permit until we leave the EU and we are considering the options following exit.

[HCWS372]

JUSTICE

Written Statement HCWS225: Correction

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald):
On 27 October I made a written statement on the Government’s decision to opt in to the EU proposal amending the Brussels IIa Regulation on family law (HCWS225). There was a minor error in that statement. The statement said “The Government have today decided to opt in to the European Commission’s proposal which repeals and replaces regulation 2201/2003, also known as the Brussels IIa regulation, on cross border family matters”. It should have said “The Government decided on 5 October to opt in to the European Commission’s proposal which repeals and replaces regulation 2201/2003, also known as the Brussels IIa regulation, on cross border family matters”.

[HCWS375]
Written Statements

Monday 19 December 2016

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council took place in Brussels on 21 and 22 November 2016. Shan Morgan, the UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, represented the UK at the Youth, Culture and the Sport sections of the Council. As is procedure, this statement sets out a record of that meeting.

Youth

The Council was asked to adopt draft conclusions on promoting new approaches in youth work to uncover and develop the potential of young people. The conclusions recommended the need to promote effective and innovative cross-sectoral policies that can help young people realise their full potential. The UK supported the conclusions and these were adopted by Council.

The presentation was immediately followed by a policy debate on young Europeans at the centre of a modern European Union, introduced by representatives from the Young Audience Unit of the European Broadcasting Union. This debate discussed how best to connect young people to policy-makers. The UK described its successful Youth Parliament initiative and welcomed the opportunity afforded to participate in cross-EU dialogue with young people through the presidency’s successful Youth Conference.

Culture

The Council presented a progress report on the proposals for the revised Audio-visual Media Services Directive. The Audio-visual Media Services Directive seeks to ensure the effective operation of the internal market for television broadcasting services by ensuring the free movement of broadcasting services throughout the EU. The Commission (represented by Commissioner Oettinger) vowed to work constructively with member states in assisting the Maltese presidency reach a general approach by next Council.

This was followed by first reading on the proposal for a European Year of Cultural Heritage (2018). The objective of this initiative is to raise awareness of the opportunities that cultural heritage bring, mainly in terms of intercultural dialogue, social cohesion and economic growth. At the same time, the European Year aims at drawing attention to the challenges that cultural heritage is facing, including environmental and physical pressure on heritage sites and illicit trafficking of cultural objects. The UK supported this and a general approach was agreed.

The Council was invited to adopt a proposal to amend the European Capitals of Culture for the years 2020 to 2033 to extend the access to EFTA/EEA countries. A general approach was agreed, with UK Government support of the proposal. The UK parliamentary scrutiny reserve was noted and maintained.

Finally there was a public debate, “towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations”. This discussed how the EU and its member states can co-operate to bring about a more strategic approach to culture in external relations. The UK’s intervention focused on the work of the British Council and the need to respect the principle of subsidiarity as member states must be free to pursue their own cultural agendas.

Sport

The Council adopted conclusions on sport diplomacy. The conclusions acknowledged that sport is a possible tool in supporting intercultural, economic and political cooperation, and that its potential can be part of extending and strengthening contacts between the EU and third countries. The UK supported the adoption of these conclusions.

This was followed by a public debate on the impact of sport on personal development. The UK intervention demonstrated the work the UK is already carrying out in this area through participation, Olympic legacy and the sport strategy.

Other business

The Maltese delegation presented information on the work programme of their incoming presidency.

The French delegation presented information on reform of the European copyright framework. This was followed by the Croatian and Irish delegations on the European Capitals of Culture 2020. The Italian delegation presented information on ‘Facing crisis in Europe: Investing in Culture’.

The Council was presented with information on the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) meeting in Glasgow (19-20 November) by the EU member states representatives in WADA, Belgium and Malta. This was followed by the French delegation on development and specific features of the organisation of European sport.

[HCWS379]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION


The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): I attended the General Affairs Council on 13 December. The meeting was chaired by the Slovak Presidency and held in Brussels.


A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2016/12/13/
Multilateral Development Bank Replenishments

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): In a world of global instability, effective international partnerships are more important than ever.

Britain has a proud track record as a global partner, contributor and problem solver. Our investment in institutions such as the World Bank helps us meet our responsibilities to the world’s poorest and is firmly in Britain’s national interest.

As a true leader on the world stage, Britain is successfully driving action to strengthen the multilateral system to ensure it is capable of meeting the unprecedented demands of the 21st century.

The world needs strong global institutions that are relevant not only for today but for the future—which is why ongoing reform at the World Bank is so important.

The UK is succeeding in securing these reforms. Following successful engagement from the UK and others, the International Development Association—which delivers the Bank’s work in the poorest countries—has agreed to:

- double the investment that goes to fragile states;
- increase support for poor countries dealing with protracted crises and hosting large numbers of refugees;
- secure opportunities for job and wealth creation; and
- boost investment in the private sector.

These reforms build on good progress made over the past three years. The recent multilateral development review found that the World Bank is one of DFID’s top performing partners, but there are still improvements to be made.

DFID is driving all agencies to be fully transparent about what, why, where and how they spend taxpayers’ money. We are pressing all our multilateral partners, including the World Bank, to publish their spending in line with international transparency standards, open up their management overheads and other costs to greater scrutiny, and push for similar tough requirements all the way down the supply chain.

The UK will continue to press the Bank and its partners to make further progress and deliver even stronger results on the ground.

Last week, the IDA negotiations that took place in Yogyakarta reached agreement on the replenishment of IDA to cover the period July 2017 to June 2020. The negotiations secured a total of $75 billion for IDA 18.

This funding will transform the lives of millions of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people. Thanks to this investment up to: 180 million children will receive life-saving vaccines, 20 million births will be attended by skilled health personnel, 45 million will get access to clean water, 35 million people will get access to reliable electricity, 10 million teachers will be recruited or trained, and 200 million children and women will get proper nutrition. These are big numbers—and behind each one are real lives that will be fundamentally improved because of this investment.
Given these impressive results, the reforms made since the last IDA replenishment, and wider reform commitments, the UK has agreed to contribute £2,516 million as a grant over the life of the replenishment, and a highly concessional loan of £820 million that will be repaid to the UK Government, to this total.

This month also saw the conclusion of the 14th replenishment of African development fund negotiations, which secured a total of $7 billion for 2017-2019. This investment will give tens of millions of people in Africa better access to transport and electricity, and millions of people access to clean water. After securing commitments from the AfDF to greater focus on job creation, women’s empowerment, private sector investment and investment in fragile countries, the UK has agreed to contribute £460 million to this total.

The world is changing fast. We all need to raise our game. The great power of the multilateral system is its potential to be more than the sum of its parts. This is why the UK will work relentlessly to drive up its performance and get the most out of every pound of taxpayers’ money.

[HCWS380]

WALES

Welsh Government Fiscal Framework

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The UK Government and Welsh Government are today announcing a new funding settlement for Wales based on need, empowering the Welsh Government to grow the Welsh economy.

This historic agreement lies at the heart of the Wales Bill’s determination to provide secure, long-term funding for the Welsh Government. The deal sets out how the Welsh Government will be funded alongside the devolution of stamp duty land tax, landfill tax and Welsh rates of income tax in a manner that is fair for Wales and fair for the rest of the UK.

Through these new and principled arrangements, the Government have ensured that the Welsh Government will have a fair level of funding for the long term, taking into account Welsh tax capacity and treating population change consistently across tax and spending.

This deal underlines the mature relationship between Westminster and Cardiff as we move closer to agreeing a lasting settlement for the people of Wales.

This will be achieved through the creation of a new needs-based factor within the Barnett formula to determine changes in the Welsh Government’s block grant in relation to devolved spending. The Governments have also agreed to use the Comparable model to determine changes in the Welsh Government’s block grant in relation to tax devolution. Alongside the Barnett formula, this will ensure population change is treated consistently within the Welsh Government’s block grant funding.

This agreement will also double the Welsh Government’s overall capital borrowing limit to £1 billion and increase the annual limit to £150 million. We will also create a new Wales reserve to enable the Welsh Government to better manage its budget.

This agreement therefore paves the way for the National Assembly for Wales to consent to the Bill and enable the Welsh Government get on with the job of using their new tax powers to grow the Welsh economy.

[HCWS378]

WORK AND PENSIONS

International Labour Organisation
Recommendation 204

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The 104th session of the International Labour Conference 2015 adopted recommendation 204 concerning the transition from the informal to the formal economy. International Labour Organisation (ILO) recommendations, adopted following negotiation amongst ILO member state Governments and business and union representatives, serve as non-binding guidelines. The Government welcome this recommendation and recognise its importance in its global context, as it acts as a guide for all countries in their work towards making full, decent, productive and freely chosen employment a central goal in their national development and growth strategy. The recommendation is primarily aimed at those countries with less developed social security systems. It is not envisaged that this recommendation will have any impact on the UK as it is consistent with UK Government policies.

[HCWS377]
Written Statements

Tuesday 20 December 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Public Bodies 2016

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): Public Bodies are a crucial part of how Government deliver their priorities. Well-governed, effective and efficient public bodies help contribute to building public trust in Government at a time when this has never been more important.

CO is collaborating across Government, engaging with senior leaders and non-executive directors from Departments and arm’s-length bodies to promote good governance, disseminate best practice and drive reform. Together, we aim to deliver a more cost-effective, transparent and simplified landscape that is better able to meet the needs of the people it serves.

“Public Bodies 2016” is an annual directory which provides a single source of top-level cost and non-cost data on all executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies and non-ministerial departments. It also sets out the Government’s strategy for public bodies reform for the remainder of the Parliament.

The Cabinet Office will today publish “Public Bodies 2016” and I am also placing it in the Library of the House. [HCWS393]

TREASURY

Decommissioning Relief Deeds

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): At Budget 2013, the Government announced they would begin signing decommissioning relief deeds. These deeds represent a new contractual approach to provide oil and gas companies with certainty on the level of tax relief they will receive on future decommissioning costs.

Since October 2013, the Government have entered into 76 decommissioning relief deeds. Oil & Gas UK estimates that these deeds have so far unlocked more than £5.9 billion of capital, which can now be invested elsewhere.

The Government committed to report to Parliament every year on progress with the deeds. The report for financial year 2015-16 is provided below.

The number of decommissioning relief agreements entered into: the Government entered into no decommissioning relief agreements in 2015-16.

The total number of decommissioning relief agreements in force at the end of that year: 72 decommissioning relief agreements were in force at the end of the year.

The number of payments made under any decommissioning relief agreements during that year, and the amount of each payment: no payments were made under any decommissioning relief agreements in 2015-16.

The total number of payments that have been made under any decommissioning relief agreements as at the end of that year, and the total amount of those payments: no payments had been made under any decommissioning relief agreement as at the end of the 2015-16 financial year.

An estimate of the maximum amount liable to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements: the Government have not made any changes to the tax regime that would generate a liability to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements. HM Treasury’s 2015-16 accounts recognise a provision of an aggregate £327 million in respect of decommissioning expenditure incurred as a result of a company defaulting on their decommissioning obligations. The majority of this is expected to be realised over the next five years. [HCWS394]

ECONOMY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Today I can inform the House that I will deliver my spring Budget statement on Wednesday 8 March 2017.

DEFENCE

Afghanistan: Locally Employed Civilians

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning): The UK remains committed to supporting our current and former local staff in Afghanistan. They played a vital part in our efforts towards a more secure, stable and prosperous Afghanistan, and our well-established redundancy and intimidation schemes recognise their contribution and the debt of gratitude we owe them.

During the past 12 months, our cross-Government ex-gratia redundancy scheme has continued to see real progress, with around 130 former local staff being relocated to the UK with their immediate families. Since the start of the scheme, we have relocated around 350 former local staff and their families, more than 900 people in total, and there are a number of cases currently going through the relocation process. Around 20 local authorities across the UK have supported the relocation of these families.

There are fewer than 100 local staff still to be made redundant as a result of the drawdown of UK forces. We expect these redundancies to be complete by the end of 2017. It is estimated that around half of these will be given the option to apply for relocation to the UK, with the remainder being eligible for the in-country training or finance options.

There are currently over 100 local staff who are benefiting from our in-country option which offers up to five years of training and financial support. These scholars are undertaking a range of courses such as high school diplomas, and qualifications in engineering and law. Around 20 former staff have gifted the training and support to eligible family members, in many cases to daughters who would not have otherwise had the opportunity to attend higher education.

Under a separate Government initiative, a dedicated in-country team has supported almost 400 local staff who have raised concerns about intimidation as a result of their employment with us. This has ranged from providing bespoke security advice, to providing financial support to over 30 staff to help them relocate to safer areas within Afghanistan. We have also provided interim
payments in a number of cases to allow individuals assessed to be at high risk to move to a safe location whilst a full investigation is completed. The levels of intimidation faced in these cases has not so far been such that we have had to relocate individuals to the UK to ensure their safety, but we keep the security situation in Afghanistan under careful review.

Over the past year, we have seen the number of claims of intimidation reduce from around 15-20 cases to about six cases per month. Notwithstanding this, I am still committed to ensuring that investigations into claims of intimidation are conducted in an effective and professional manner, and the safety of our former staff remains the paramount consideration.

A Danish military legal adviser has provided a non-UK perspective to the decision-making process. In addition, we have put in place a number of measures to provide outside assurance of the intimidation policy: a randomly selected 20% of case decisions are subject to legal review to ensure that the policy is working as it should; and, as announced in November last year, a Committee has been established to provide additional external assurance of the delivery of the policy.

The Locally Engaged Civilians (LEC) Assurance Committee, which I chair, has oversight and scrutiny of the intimidation policy. We have held four meetings this year. Each Committee member has been selected to ensure they can provide expert, independent and impartial advice on the application of the policy. They include advisers drawn from the House of Lords; the Intimidation Investigation Unit in Kabul; and HM Forces. Additionally, I am pleased to confirm the appointment of a former LEC as an adviser to the Committee. He brings with him a first-hand perspective of the issues, and provides invaluable insight into the genuine threat faced by local staff in Afghanistan, as well as the viability of the proposed mitigation measures. These Committee members are supported by representatives from the Government Departments involved in the policy.

The Committee has agreed a robust set of terms of reference that empower us to identify areas where the administration of the policy could be improved. We have so far reviewed the application of the policy in three closed cases, and some areas for improvement are being addressed as a result. These include a review of the guidance provided to those involved in the decision-making process, to clarify inconsistent or ambiguous language.

We believe our schemes compare well with those provided by other nations that have operated in Afghanistan. On termination of employment, other nations generally offer either a financial lump sum or a relocation package. However, unlike our ex-gratia redundancy scheme, most nations also require staff to prove they are at risk in order to relocate. The UK is the only nation with a permanent team of trained investigation officers in country to investigate claims of intimidation.

I am confident that the UK’s arrangements meet our commitment to protecting our locally employed staff when their safety is at threat as a result of their work for us.

Future Nuclear Deterrent

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): On 18 May 2011 the then Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), made an oral statement to the House, Official Report, column 351, announcing the approval of the initial gate investment stage for the procurement of the successor submarines to the Vanguard class ballistic missile submarines. He also placed in the Library of the House a report, “The United Kingdom’s Future Nuclear Deterrent: The Submarine Initial Gate Parliamentary Report”.

As confirmed in the 2015 strategic defence and security review, and in accordance with the motion approved by this House on 18 July 2016, this Government are committed to publishing an annual report on the programme. I am today publishing the fifth report, “The United Kingdom’s Future Nuclear Deterrent: 2016 Update to Parliament”. A copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS383]

Reserve Forces and Cadets Association

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of a letter that I have sent to Lt Gen (Retd) Brims, the Chair of the Future Reserves 2020 External Scrutiny Team to update him on the programme, and particularly on the recommendations that his team’s report made. I am grateful for their work.

[HCWS385]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Avian Influenza

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): The chief veterinary officer has confirmed a case of avian flu in a turkey farm in East Lindsey, Lincolnshire.

Test results have confirmed the presence of a high pathogenicity H5N8 strain of the disease. This is the strain currently circulating in Europe. As a result, the Animal and Plant Health Agency has raised the risk of an incursion into wild birds in the UK from medium to high and into poultry from low but heightened to low to medium, dependent on geographic location.

While this disease affects birds severely, the advice from Public Health England is that the risk to public health from this strain of bird flu is very low with no human cases ever reported, and the Food Standards Agency has said there is no food safety risk for consumers.

We have taken robust action, imposing a 3 km protection zone and 10 km surveillance zone last Friday to limit the risk of disease spreading. The birds on the farm have either died or were humanely culled. All carcasses have been removed and rendered under strict biosecurity standards. Cleansing and disinfection of the site has commenced.
We have tried and tested procedures for dealing with such animal disease outbreaks and a strong track record of controlling and eliminating previous outbreaks of avian flu in the UK. We are working closely with operational partners, devolved Administration colleagues and the industry to deal effectively with this outbreak.

My Department continues to carefully monitor the situation in the UK and Europe. Following my statement of 7 December where I announced the mandatory housing of poultry and other kept birds, and as a result of the increased risk to UK poultry, I have today announced a change to the licensing of bird gatherings including sales and auctions. This prevents until further notice, gatherings of domestic poultry, and places enhanced biosecurity requirements on gatherings of other species including aviary birds, pigeons and raptors. This follows veterinary advice on the risk of disease spread through such gatherings.

I continue to urge bird keepers to be vigilant for any signs of disease, ensure they are maintaining good biosecurity on their premises, seek prompt advice from their vet and report suspect disease to their nearest APHA office.

[HCWS386]

EDUCATION

Schools Revenue Funding Settlement 2017-18

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): Today I am announcing details of schools revenue funding for 2017-18. This announcement includes the dedicated schools grant (DSG), the education services grant (ESG) transitional grant and the pupil premium.

The distribution of the DSG to local authorities will continue to be set out in three spending blocks for each authority: a schools block, a high needs block and an early years block.

The schools block has been allocated on the basis of the schools block units of funding announced in the Secretary of State’s statement to the House on 21 July 2016. To protect schools from significant budget reductions, we will continue with a minimum funding guarantee that ensures no school loses more than 1.5% per pupil in its 2017-18 budget—excluding sixth-form funding and ESG—compared to 2016-17, and before the pupil premium is added.

We have been able to provide an additional £130 million for the DSG high needs block. The high needs block supports provision for pupils and students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), up to the age of 25, and alternative provision for pupils who cannot receive their education in schools.

The DSG early years block comprises funding for the 15 hours’ entitlement for three and four-year-olds: the additional 15 hours for three and four-year-old children of eligible working parents from September 2017; participation funding for two-year-olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds; the early years pupil premium; and the disability access fund. The provisional allocations for this block were announced in the Secretary of State’s statement of 1 December 2016.

The ESG transitional grant for local authorities will be set at a financial year rate of £66 per pupil and paid for the period April to August 2017. We will also continue to provide a protection to limit the reduction of academies’ budgets as a result of the ending of ESG from September 2017.

The pupil premium per pupil amounts for 2017-18 will be protected at the current rates, which are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pupil Type</th>
<th>Per pupil rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged pupils: primary</td>
<td>£1,320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged pupils: secondary</td>
<td>£935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil premium plus: looked after children (LAC)</td>
<td>£1,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service children</td>
<td>£300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| A looked after child is defined in the Children Act 1989 as one who is in the care of, or provided with accommodation by, an English or Welsh local authority.

Pupil premium allocations for financial year 2017-18 will be published in June 2017 following the receipt of pupil number data from the spring 2017 schools and alternative provision censuses.

Details of these arrangements have been published on gov.uk.

[HCWS389]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: 12 December 2016

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 12 December. The Foreign Affairs Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

A provisional report of the meeting and conclusions adopted can be found at:


EU-Africa relations

The Council discussed EU-Africa relations in preparation for the EU-Africa summit in November 2017. Ministers discussed priorities in the EU’s relations with Africa, as well as how those relations should evolve in the light of emerging economic, security, demographic and migration challenges. I encouraged the EU to fulfil its security commitments, whilst supporting capacity building and African ownership of African challenges in the longer term.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Council adopted restrictive measures against seven DRC officials, and had a short discussion on the situation in the country. Ms Mogherini set out the clear aim of the measures: to deter a violent response to likely protests on 19 December when President Kabila’s mandate would come to an end.
Syria

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the situation in Syria in view of the latest developments, in particular in Aleppo. I stressed the severity of the situation in Aleppo, underlining the role of Russia and Iran as well as the Syrian regime, and the importance of holding to account those responsible for the appalling situation.

Migration

Ministers discussed migration issues ahead of the European Council on 15 December. The Council took stock of the progress made on the migration partnership framework approach; and on the country-specific compacts with the five priority countries (Mali, Niger, Senegal, Nigeria and Ethiopia).

Any Other Business (AOB)

France raised the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, noting the importance of swift implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2270 and encouraging consideration of further EU autonomous measures.

In the margins of the Council, Ms Mogherini, EU Foreign Ministers and the Cuban Foreign Minister, Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, signed the EU-Cuba Political Dialogue and Co-operation Agreement. After the Council meeting, Ministers had an informal discussion with President Santos of Colombia. The EU and participating member states then signed the constitutive agreement of the EU Trust Fund for Colombia.

Ministers agreed without discussion a number of measures:

Council conclusions on South Sudan.

Council conclusions on the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

A protocol to the framework agreement on comprehensive partnership and co-operation between the EU and Vietnam, to take account of the accession of Croatia.

The EU position for the 3rd meeting of the EU-Ukraine Association Council in Brussels on 19 December 2016.

Prolonging the mandate of the EU monitoring mission in Georgia for a further period of two years (until 14 December 2018) and allocating to the mission a budget of €18 million for the period 15 December 2016 to 14 December 2017.

Prolonging the mandate of the two common security and defence policy missions in Somalia, the civilian capacity-building mission (EUCAP Nestor) and the military training mission (EUTM), until 31 December 2018. The Council renamed EUCAP Nestor capacity-building mission “EUCAP Somalia”.

Renewing for two years the declaration on the common funding of the deployment of EU battlegroups, until December 2018.

Travel Advice

The FCO provides travel advice notices for 225 countries and territories worldwide. There were more than 40 million individual hits on the online travel advice service in 2015. The FCO in London and all posts throughout our diplomatic network overseas actively monitor safety and security issues on a 24-hour basis and we made 2,200 updates to our travel advice in 2015. Where possible, we publish country maps to help communicate this advice. In some cases we will advise against travel or all but essential travel to a country or region as a result of terrorism, security concerns or other risks. We know that when we advise against travel it can have an impact on individuals and business, but the safety of British nationals is our overriding concern.

The threat from terrorism is evolving. Despite the pressure of military action in Syria and Iraq and concerted and sustained counter-terrorism action globally, the main terrorist groups—Daesh, Al Qaeda and groups associated with them—continue to pose a threat to UK interests globally, including British travellers. Since 2012, there have been more than 25 major terrorist attacks resulting in the deaths of at least 300 tourists around the world, including 31 British nationals. In particular, we have seen the growth of so called “lone wolf” attacks, which are difficult to predict and disrupt and could take place in almost any country.

In response to the changing nature of the threat the former Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), commissioned a review to assess whether changes in how we present travel advice might help us reflect the evolving threat from terrorism, while providing the clearest possible advice to the public. This included a public consultation to help consider potential improvements to the travel advice service. One thousand and nine people responded to the online consultation in March and April 2016. The consultation team met stakeholders, including the travel and insurance industries; encouraged written feedback; and consulted other Government Departments, including the Department for International Development and UK Trade & Investment, as well as several other countries whose travel advice systems are comparable with our own. The aim of the public consultation was to make sure British nationals continued to have information that was readily accessible and easy to understand so they could make informed decisions whenever and wherever they travel. The consultation sought to find out how people used the travel advice service: whether they found it useful; and whether the way information was presented could be improved to make it more accessible. It also looked at whether changes could be made to provide a greater level of detail and better understanding of the level of risk travellers face in any given country.

Taking all of this into account, I have decided to make a number of improvements to the travel advice service. I want British nationals to be able to travel abroad for business, study or pleasure, but with a clear personal understanding of the risks entailed in doing so.

While the principles of travel advice set out in the 2004 review (Review of Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice, Cm 6158) in relation to the threat from terrorism remain unchanged, we shall now describe the threat in greater narrative detail, moving away from simple descriptors (e.g. “there is a high threat from...
This is to provide a greater level of information to the public, helping them to understand better the levels of risk in their travel plans. The new expanded text will describe the threat in terms of its predictability (whether attacks are likely to happen), extent (targets and locations of previous attacks and methodologies employed), context (which groups are responsible, and the history of attacks) and, where appropriate, mitigation (where host nations are actively countering the threat, including through publicly avowed counter terrorism measures and arrests). During the consultation, the public and travel industry said they would welcome this approach. We will also make design improvements to travel advice pages so that users can more easily find the information relevant to them. These changes will be introduced over the coming months, building on work that officials have already begun to increase the amount of detailed information about terrorism in our advice.

I am confident that these changes will ensure our travel advice continues to provide effective information to help British travellers make informed decisions about their personal travel plans and security overseas. Our travel advice will continue to reflect the best judgements we can make on the information available to us at the time.

[HCWS390]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Policing and Crime Bill

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I will shortly be placing in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order No. 83 O of the Standing Orders of the House of Commons relating to public business in respect of the Lords amendments to the Policing and Crime Bill.

[HCWS387]

PRIME MINISTER

Parliamentary Delegations

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): The hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) and the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) have been appointed as full members of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in place of the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (David Jones) and the hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes). The hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) has also been appointed as an alternate member in place of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith).

The right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Cheryl Gillan) has been appointed as a representative member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb). The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) has been appointed as a substitute member of the delegation in place of the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Virendra Sharma), who has been appointed as a representative member in place of the hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton) and the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) has been appointed as substitute members of the delegation in place of the hon. Member for Newport East (Paul Flynn) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Khalid Mahmood). Lord Wilson of Tillyhorn has also been appointed as a substitute member of the delegation in place of Lord Wright of Richmond.

[HCWS382]

TRANSPORT

Road Freight

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I chaired a roundtable on 2 November about roadside facilities and parking for lorry drivers. This followed an Adjournment debate, secured by the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), on 7 September about fly-parking in Kent.

Key issues identified at the roundtable, which could be considered in the Kent context and which will have wider applicability and interest, are:

- the join up between national and local planning frameworks;
- provision of lorry parking facilities;
- minimum standards at such parking facilities;
- payment systems for facilities; and
- when facilities are supplied ensuring there is enforcement against lorries stopping in the wrong place (including achieving that without a proliferation of signs and lines).

In due course I will set out actions to tackle each and all of these.

Some of these issues as they relate to Kent, in particular, were discussed at a meeting of the Kent Strategic Freight Group on 2 December, chaired by the County Council. I am urgently considering how they can be progressed, including how enforcement against fly-parking can be made to work better.

A contract was awarded last week for an extensive national survey of lorry parking to be completed by the spring will add to the evidence about what should be done where.

Work is also under way to encourage private sector distribution centres to allow drivers to have access to decent facilities when supplying them.

I chaired another roundtable on 17 November about recruitment into the logistics sector. Better lorry parking and facilities can contribute to improving the recruitment and retention of drivers. However it is one of many issues where Government working with the private sector can contribute.
Already waiting times for lorry driving tests have been reduced substantially at a time of increasing demand for tests, through the recruitment of more examiners. Processes for licence renewals are being streamlined. Apprenticeships for lorry driving and other jobs in the road haulage and logistics industry start early next year through the new trailblazers scheme.

I look forward to working with Members of Parliament (including the All Party Parliamentary Group on Freight), local authorities, the haulage industry, the trade unions and all other interested stakeholders to develop our plans.

[HCWS392]
Petition

Wednesday 7 December 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of York Outer,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Julian Sturdy.]  

The petition of residents of Caerphilly County Borough,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Wayne David.]
Petitions

Thursday 8 December 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of North East Fife,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional consequences.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Stephen Gethins.]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions:

The pension system, along with the whole welfare system, needs to change to reflect the reality of today. In recent decades we are living longer, and we are able to work for longer as we become healthier.

The equalisation and acceleration of State Pension age for both men and women was necessary to ensure the system’s sustainability in light of increasing life expectancy and increasing pressure on public resources, and the package now in place is balanced and affordable.

The changes to the State Pension age began with the gradual equalisation of State Pension age at 65 for both men and women, which was first set out in the Pensions Act 1995. This was necessary to meet the UK’s obligations under EU law to eliminate gender inequalities in social security provision.

The increase in the State Pension age to 66 was set out in the Pensions Act 2007 and due to increasing life expectancy the Pensions Act 2011 accelerated this process...
to allow for a rise to 66 by 2020 for both genders and provided for the equalisation of the State Pension age to 65 by November 2018.

During the 2011 Pensions Act the Government made a concession which slowed down the increase of the state pension age for women so no one would face an increase of more than 18 months compared to the increase as part of the Pensions Act 1995. Transitional arrangements at a cost of £1.1 billion were made in order to lessen the impact of these changes for those worst affected, and for 81% of these women the increase will be no more than 12 months. This concession benefited almost a quarter of a million women who would otherwise have experienced delays of up to two years.

Reversing the 1995 Act would be unaffordable—costing a minimum estimate of £77 billion. Without equalisation, and in 2010, women would spend on average 41% of their lives in retirement with a State Pension age of 60.

These changes were fully debated and voted on in 2011 when legislation was before Parliament, and all those affected by increases in State Pension age by the 2011 Act were written to in the period between January 2012 and November 2013.

The Department for Work and Pensions provided a range of additional information in order for all individuals to find out their State Pension age and the conditions of their benefits. Since April 2000, the Department has provided more than 14 million personalised State Pension estimates to people who requested them either online, via telephone or post, and encourages people to request these State Pension estimates as part of on-going communications.

In addition, employment maximises people’s opportunities to build up savings, helps to maintain social networks, and is beneficial to health provided the employment takes into account the person’s broader circumstances. For most people work is beneficial not only because it provides an income, but also because it also gives individuals greater control over their own lives, and independent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the rise in women’s State Pension age since 2010 has been accompanied by increases in employment rates for the women affected.

For those who struggle to find employment and where people need it, there is a safety net in place through the welfare system.

Supporting individuals aged 50 years and over to remain in the labour market and tackling the barriers to them doing so is a key priority for this Government. By the mid-2030s the number of individuals aged 50 and over will represent over half of the UK adult population and employers increasingly need to employ and retain the skills and experience of older workers. To support these individuals the Default Retirement Age was abolished, so individuals can retire when it is right for them, and the right to request flexible working was extended.

This Government are deeply committed to ensuring that employers are aware of the wealth of skills and experience that older workers bring to the workplace, and on 4 October the Government announced the appointment of the Business in the Community Age at Work leadership team led by Andy Briggs, CEO of Aviva UK and Ireland Life, as Business Champion for Older Workers. Mr Briggs and this team of employers will spearhead the Government’s work to support employers to retain, retrain, and recruit older workers.

Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches have the flexibility to offer all claimants, including older people, a comprehensive menu of help which includes skills provision and job search support. Work Coaches undertake extensive training before taking up the post, and build up a wide range of skills and in-depth labour market knowledge, and additional training modules are available for Work Coaches when they deal with older claimants to support them more effectively and in understanding the challenges older claimants face.

Older Claimant Champions were introduced, in April 2015, in the seven Jobcentre Plus Regional Groups to tackle the barriers faced by older claimants in getting back to work. Older Claimant Champions work with Jobcentre Work Coaches—and other staff—to emphasise the importance of supporting older claimants, share best practice and challenge out of date perceptions to support this group of people.

Where there are health conditions or disabilities, the Department has published the Work, Health and Disability Green Paper which looks at ways of better joining up the health, welfare and employment systems to support those seeking work as well as those in work.

A Carers in Employment pilot has been established across nine Local Authorities to explore how businesses can give employees with caring responsibilities more help, for example promoting flexible working patterns and setting up carers surgeries to help carers manage their caring responsibilities alongside their paid work.

In addition to increasing employment prospects for women above the age of 60, this Government have introduced the New State Pension. The system in place for people who reached their State Pension age before 6 April 2016 was extremely complex and the new State Pension brings greater clarity by helping people to understand their State Pension more easily. It is also much more generous for many women who have been historically worse off under the old system. On average, women reaching State Pension age last year get a higher state pension over their lifetimes than women who reached State Pension age at any point before them, even when the acceleration of State Pension age is taken into account. And, by 2030, over 3 million women stand to gain an average of £550 extra per year as a result of these changes.

The New State Pension works hand in hand with Automatic Enrolment, enabling many more people to save in a workplace pension. And, combined with reviews of the State Pension age, these measures are designed to form the main elements of a sustainable basis of retirement income in the decades to come.

The Government have already made transitional arrangements for those most affected by changes to their State Pension age and introducing further concessions cannot be justified given the imperative to focus public resources on helping those most in need.
Petition

Monday 12 December 2016

OBSERVATIONS

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Waste transfer station in Scunthorpe

The petition of residents of Scunthorpe County Constituency,

Declares that there is strong opposition on the grounds of smell, noise, vermin and pollution to planning application WD/2016/1556 which has been submitted to North Lincolnshire Council proposing to build a waste transfer station on Sunningdale Road, Scunthorpe.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges North Lincolnshire Council to refuse planning application WD/2016/1556, which seeks to build a waste transfer station on Sunningdale Road in Scunthorpe, on the grounds of smell, noise, vermin and pollution.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Nic Dakin, Official Report, 22 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 869.] [P001981]

Observations from The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell):

North Lincolnshire Council are responsible for minerals and waste planning in their area. The Government’s policy is not to interfere with the jurisdiction of a local planning authority unless it is necessary to do so. This is because local authority councillors are elected to represent the views of local people and, in the main, it is these Councillors who are in the best position to decide whether a development should go ahead. In determining a planning application the local planning authority are required to have regard to all material considerations including the development plan, national policies and views expressed by third parties. It is, of course, for local planning authorities to provide whatever justification that may be appropriate to give for their decisions and procedures.

The Government are committed to giving more power to councils and committees to make their own decisions on planning issues, and believes that decisions should be made at the local level wherever possible.
Petitions

Wednesday 14 December 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of Caerphilly County Borough,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc. / [P002000]

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH

New national stroke strategy

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that there is a need for a new national strategy for stroke; further that a new strategy will ensure that stroke survivors and their carers receive the support they need; further that it will drive improvements in hospital care; further that it will drive the roll out of a new treatment, thrombectomy; and further that a new strategy will save lives.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to commit to writing a new national stroke strategy.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr Nigel Evans, Official Report, 14 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 8P. /]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat):

Decisions on whether the stroke strategy should be renewed are a matter for NHS England. As NHS England has moved away from disease specific strategies towards guidance that is more cross cutting and because the stroke strategy remains valid and implementation of it continues, NHS England has no current plans to renew it. Action is being taken to ensure the progress made on stroke continues. Initiatives include:

ongoing work in virtually all parts of the country to organise acute stroke care to ensure that all stroke patients, regardless of where they live or what time of the day or week they have their stroke, have access to high quality specialist care;

publication of the Cardiovascular Disease (CVD) Outcomes Strategy in 2013, which includes many stroke specific strategic ambitions;

NHS England has established a CVD collaborative to bring together relevant stakeholders in the field of CVD and provide a forum where relevant work being undertaken in this area and potential new initiatives can be discussed and responsibilities for action determined;

NHS England’s National Clinical Director (NCD) for stroke is working with Clinical Networks, Urgent and Emergency Care Networks, Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and Sustainability and Transformation Plan areas on how stroke care is best delivered to local communities; services for the management of transient ischaemic attack (TIA) are changing in many areas to meet the new standard that all TIA patients should be seen and assessed within 24 hours, not just high risk patients. CCGs are being encouraged to increase the geographical coverage of early supported discharge services;

thrombectomy for stroke is to be considered for new funding through specialisation commissioning;

NHS England continues to fund the Sentinel Stroke National Audit Programme which records information on the processes of care and outcomes both for the acute hospital phase and the subsequent care in the community up to 6 months after the stroke; and

Public Health England will be running another Act FAST campaign early in 2017 to raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of stroke.

Prevention of stroke and other cardiovascular diseases is also a priority for NHS England, particularly reducing the very high prevalence of CVD in patients with mental health illness. The NHS Diabetes Prevention Programme will also have an impact on reducing the burden of stroke. Over 20% of stroke admissions have diabetes as one of the causative factors.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of Caerphilly County Borough,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Wayne David, Official Report, 7 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 2P. /]

Petitions in the same terms were also presented by the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) [P001988]; the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) [P001989]; and the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) [P001991].


**Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions:**

The pension system, along with the whole welfare system, needs to change to reflect the reality of today. In recent decades we are living longer, and we are able to work for longer as we become healthier.

The equalisation and acceleration of State Pension age for both men and women was necessary to ensure the system's sustainability in light of increasing life expectancy and increasing pressure on public resources, and the package now in place is balanced and affordable.

The changes to the State Pension age began with the gradual equalisation of State Pension age at 65 for both men and women, which was first set out in the Pensions Act 1995. This was necessary to meet the UK's obligations under EU law to eliminate gender inequalities in social security provision.

The increase of the State Pension age to 66 was set out in the Pensions Act 2007 and due to increasing life expectancy the Pensions Act 2011 accelerated this process to allow for a rise to 66 by 2020 for both genders and provided for the equalisation of the State Pension age to 65 by November 2018.

During the 2011 Pensions Act the Government made a concession which slowed down the increase of the state pension age for women so no one would face an increase of more than 18 months compared to the increase as part of the Pensions Act 1995. Transitional arrangements at a cost of £1.1 billion were made in order to lessen the impact of these changes for those worst affected, and for 81% of these women the increase will be no more than 12 months. This concession benefited almost a quarter of a million women who would otherwise have experienced delays of up to two years.

Reversing the 1995 Act would be unaffordable—costing a minimum estimate of £77 billion. Without equalisation, and in 2010, women would spend on average 41% of their lives in retirement with a State Pension age of 60.

These changes were fully debated and voted on in 2011 when legislation was before Parliament, and all those affected by increases in State Pension age by the 2011 Act were written to in the period between January 2012 and November 2013.

The Department for Work and Pensions provided a range of additional information in order for all individuals to find out their State Pension age and the conditions of their benefits.

Since April 2000, the Department has provided more than 14 million personalised State Pension estimates to people who requested them either online, via telephone or post, and encourages people to request these State Pension estimates as part of ongoing communications.

In addition, employment maximises people's opportunities to build up savings, helps to maintain social networks, and is beneficial to health provided the employment takes into account the person's broader circumstances. For most people work is beneficial not only because it provides an income, but also because it also gives individuals greater control over their own lives, and independent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the rise in women's State Pension age since 2010 has been accompanied by increases in employment rates for the women affected.

For those who struggle to find employment and where people need it, there is a safety net in place through the welfare system.

Supporting individuals aged 50 years and over to remain in the labour market and tackling the barriers to them doing so is a key priority for this Government. By the mid-2030s the number of individuals aged 50 and over will represent over half of the UK adult population and employers increasingly need to employ and retain the skills and experience of older workers. To support these individuals the Default Retirement Age was abolished, so individuals can retire when it is right for them, and the right to request flexible working was extended.

This Government are deeply committed to ensuring that employers are aware of the wealth of skills and experience that older workers bring to the workplace, and on 4 October the Government announced the appointment of the Business in the Community Age at Work leadership team led by Andy Briggs, CEO of Aviva UK and Ireland Life, as Business Champion for Older Workers. Mr Briggs and this team of employers will spearhead the Government's work to support employers to retain, retrain, and recruit older workers.

Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches have the flexibility to offer all claimants, including older people, a comprehensive menu of help which includes skills provision and job search support. Work Coaches undertake extensive training before taking up the post, and build up a wide range of skills and in-depth labour market knowledge, and additional training modules are available for Work Coaches when they deal with older claimants to support them more effectively and in understanding the challenges older claimants face.

Older Claimant Champions were introduced, in April 2015, in the seven Jobcentre Plus Regional Groups to tackle the barriers faced by older claimants in getting back to work. Older Claimant Champions work with Jobcentre Work Coaches—and other staff—to emphasise the importance of supporting older claimants, share best practice and challenge out of date perceptions to support this group of people.

Where there are health conditions or disabilities, the Department has published the Work, Health and Disability Green Paper which looks at ways of better joining up the health, welfare and employment systems to support those seeking work as well as those in work. A Carers in Employment pilot has been established across nine Local Authorities to explore how businesses can give employees with caring responsibilities more help, for example promoting flexible working patterns and setting up carers surgeries to help carers manage their caring responsibilities alongside their paid work.

In addition to increasing employment prospects for women above the age of 60, this Government have introduced the New State Pension. The system in place for people who reached their State Pension age before 6 April 2016 was extremely complex and the new State Pension brings greater clarity by helping people to understand their State Pension more easily. It is also much more generous for many women who have been historically worse off under the old system. On average, women reaching State Pension age last year get a higher state pension over their lifetimes than women who reached State Pension age at any point before them, even when the acceleration of State Pension age is taken
into account. And, by 2030, over 3 million women stand to gain an average of £550 extra per year as a result of these changes.

The New State Pension works hand in hand with Automatic Enrolment, enabling many more people to save in a workplace pension. And, combined with reviews of the State Pension age, these measures are designed to form the main elements of a sustainable basis of retirement income in the decades to come.

The Government have already made transitional arrangements for those most affected by changes to their State Pension age and introducing further concessions cannot be justified given the imperative to focus public resources on helping those most in need.
Petition

Thursday 15 December 2016

OBSERVATIONS

DEFENCE

The Royal Marines

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that RM Stonehouse, which is home to 3 Commando Brigade, will be disposed of through the Ministry of Defence’s estate optimisation strategy.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to urge the Government to ensure that 3 Commando Brigade is retained in Plymouth and not moved out of the local area.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Oliver Colvile, Official Report, 1 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 860.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence, (Mark Lancaster):

On 7 November 2016, the Secretary of State for Defence confirmed the intention to dispose of Stonehouse Barracks in 2023 as part of the Department’s estate optimisation strategy “A Better Defence Estate”. Under current reprovision plans, the units based at Stonehouse Barracks will move to the Plymouth and Torpoint area. This move will contribute to a strategy where the Royal Navy will focus on Centres of Specialisation with operating bases and training establishments located predominantly around the port areas and Naval Air Stations, and an Amphibious Centre of Specialisation in the South West based around Devonport. Consolidating the Defence estate in this way will also help to provide greater stability for Service personnel and their families. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) recognises the positive integration between the military and civilian communities in Plymouth, which has been demonstrated through Plymouth City Council’s commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant, and we hope this will continue.

Over the next 12-18 months, the MOD will conduct a series of detailed assessments to more precisely define the exact moves and sequencing required for the units which currently occupy Stonehouse Barracks in line with implementing the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review. The MOD will continue to work closely with Plymouth City Council and other interested parties to consider the best possible future uses for the site. The Secretary of State for Defence is committed to reporting to Parliament each year on the progress made to implement the strategy. “A Better Defence Estate” is available in the Library of the House.
Petitions

Friday 16 December 2016

OBSERVATIONS

CABINET OFFICE

The boundaries of the Wellingborough Parliamentary Constituency

The Humble Petition of residents of Finedon, Northamptonshire and the surrounding areas,

Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the boundaries of the Wellingborough Parliamentary Constituency should continue to include the village of Finedon due to the geographical, local government and historical ties that exist in the area.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Cabinet Office to encourage the Boundary Commission for England to retain Finedon as part of the Wellingborough Constituency in its upcoming review.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.—[Presented by Mr Peter Bone, Official Report, 28 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 1371.]

Observations from The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office:

The four Boundary Commissions are conducting the current Boundary Review in accordance with the legislation agreed in the last Parliament. It is for the independent Boundary Commissions to make proposals for new constituencies. The Government are not able to intervene in the review process and representations on proposed constituencies should be made direct to the relevant Boundary Commission.

Each Boundary Commission will undertake a consultation of 12 weeks on its initial proposals and there will be further opportunity for members of the public to submit representations as the Boundary Review progresses. The Boundary Commissions are required to submit their final proposals to Ministers by 1 October 2018.

The Government are committed to addressing the unfairness of the current Parliamentary boundaries, reducing the number of MPs to 600 to cut the cost of politics and making votes of more equal value. The Government believe it is essential that the Boundary Review is allowed to take its course, otherwise the next general election would be fought on the basis of electoral registers that are up to 20 years old.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of Erewash,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Official Report, 14 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 9P.]

Observation from The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions:

The pension system, along with the whole welfare system, needs to change to reflect the reality of today. In recent decades we are living longer, and we are able to work for longer as we become healthier.

The equalisation and acceleration of State Pension age for both men and women was necessary to ensure the system’s sustainability in light of increasing life expectancy and increasing pressure on public resources, and the package now in place is balanced and affordable.

The changes to the State Pension age began with the gradual equalisation of State Pension age at 65 for both men and women, which was first set out in the Pensions Act 1995. This was necessary to meet the UK’s obligations under EU law to eliminate gender inequalities in social security provision.

The increase of the State Pension age to 66 was set out in the Pensions Act 2007 and due to increasing life expectancy the Pensions Act 2011 accelerated this process to allow for a rise to 66 by 2020 for both genders and provided for the equalisation of the State Pension age to 65 by November 2018.

During the 2011 Pensions Act the Government made a concession which slowed down the increase of the state pension age for women so no one would face an increase of more than 18 months compared to the increase as part of the Pensions Act 1995. Transitional arrangements at a cost of £1.1 billion were made in order to lessen the impact of these changes for those worst affected, and for 81% of these women the increase will be no more than 12 months. This concession benefited almost a quarter of a million women who would otherwise have experienced delays of up to two years.

Reversing the 1995 Act would be unaffordable—costing a minimum estimate of £77 billion. Without equalisation, and in 2010, women would spend on average 41% of their lives in retirement with a State Pension age of 60.

These changes were fully debated and voted on in 2011 when legislation was before Parliament, and all those affected by increases in State Pension age by the 2011 Act were written to in the period between January 2012 and November 2013.

The Department for Work and Pensions provided a range of additional information in order for all individuals to find out their State Pension age and the conditions of their benefits.
Since April 2000, the Department has provided more than 14 million personalised State Pension estimates to people who requested them online, telephone or post, and encourages people to request these State Pension estimates as part of on-going communications.

In addition, employment maximises people’s opportunities to build up savings, helps to maintain social networks, and is beneficial to health provided the employment takes into account the person’s broader circumstances. For most people work is beneficial not only because it provides an income, but also because it gives individuals greater control over their own lives, and independent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the rise in women’s State Pension age since 2010 has been accompanied by increases in employment rates for the women affected.

For those who struggle to find employment and where people need it, there is a safety net in place through the welfare system.

Supporting individuals aged 50 years and over to remain in the labour market and tackling the barriers to them doing so is a key priority for this Government. By the mid-2030s the number of individuals aged 50 and over will represent over half of the UK adult population and employers increasingly need to employ and retain the skills and experience of older workers. To support these individuals the Default Retirement Age was abolished, so individuals can retire when it is right for them, and the right to request flexible working was extended.

The Government are deeply committed to ensuring that employers are aware of the wealth of skills and experience that older workers bring to the workplace, and on 4 October the Government announced the appointment of the Business in the Community Age at Work leadership team led by Andy Briggs, CEO of Aviva UK and Ireland Life, as Business Champion for Older Workers. Mr Briggs and this team of employers will spearhead the Government’s work to support employers to retain, retrain, and recruit older workers.

Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches have the flexibility to offer all claimants, including older people, a comprehensive menu of help which includes skills provision and job search support. Work Coaches undertake extensive training before taking up the post, and build up a wide range of skills and in-depth labour market knowledge, and additional training modules are available for Work Coaches when they deal with older claimants to support them more effectively and in understanding the challenges older claimants face.

Older Claimant Champions were introduced, in April 2015, in the seven Jobcentre Plus Regional Groups to tackle the barriers faced by older claimants in getting back to work. Older Claimant Champions work with Jobcentre Work Coaches - and other staff - to emphasise the importance of supporting older claimants, share best practice and challenge out of date perceptions to support this group of people.

Where there are health conditions or disabilities, the Department has published the Work, health and Disability Green Paper which looks at ways of better joining up the health, welfare and employment systems to support those seeking work as well as those in work. A Carers in Employment pilot has been established across nine Local Authorities to explore how businesses can give employees with caring responsibilities more help, for example promoting flexible working patterns and setting up carers surgeries to help carers manage their caring responsibilities alongside their paid work.

In addition to increasing employment prospects for women above the age of 60, this Government have introduced the New State Pension. The system in place for people who reached their State Pension age before 6 April 2016 was extremely complex and the new State Pension brings greater clarity by helping people to understand their State Pension more easily. It is also much more generous for many women who have been historically worse off under the old system. On average, women reaching State Pension age last year get a higher state pension over their lifetimes than women who reached State Pension age at any point before them, even when the acceleration of State Pension age is taken into account. And, by 2030, over 3 million women stand to gain an average of £550 extra per year as a result of these changes.

The New State Pension works hand in hand with Automatic Enrolment, enabling many more people to save in a workplace pension. And, combined with reviews of the State Pension age, these measures are designed to form the main elements of a sustainable basis of retirement income in the decades to come.

The Government have already made transitional arrangements for those most affected by changes to their State Pension age and introducing further concessions cannot be justified given the imperative to focus public resources on helping those most in need.
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 7 December 2016

TREASURY

Draft Immigration Act 2014 (Current Accounts) (Excluded Accounts and Notification Requirements) Regulations 2016

The following is an extract from the Fifth Delegated Legislation Committee debate on the Draft Immigration Act 2014 (Current Accounts) (Excluded Accounts and Notification Requirements) Regulations 2016

Simon Kirby: I need to be clear on this. The rationale and scope of the legislation is personal current accounts because that is felt to be the area where the legislation can have the most effect. Businesses of all sizes are unaffected. The only time that businesses are mentioned is that if someone has a current account that falls foul of the matching process, the banks are obliged to provide all the information about the other accounts that that individual may hold. However, it does not stop any business accounts—large or small.

[Official Report, Fifth Delegated Legislation Committee, 6 December 2016; c. 13.]

Letter of correction from Simon Kirby

An error has been identified in the closing speech of the debate in the Fifth Delegated Legislation Committee on Draft Immigration Act 2014 (Current Accounts) (Excluded Accounts and Notification Requirements) Regulations 2016.

The correct response should have been:

Simon Kirby: I need to be clear on this. The rationale and scope of the legislation is personal current accounts because that is felt to be the area where the legislation can have the most effect. Businesses of all sizes are unaffected. The only time that businesses are mentioned is that if someone has a current account that falls foul of the matching process, the banks are obliged to provide all the information about the other accounts that that individual may hold. However, it does not require firms to carry out an immigration check on any business accounts—large or small.
Ministerial Correction

Monday 12 December 2016

HOME DEPARTMENT
Asset Recovery Regime

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for the Home Department on 5 December 2016.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Further to that, the simple question is: will we be a member of Europol post exit from the European Union?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that we recently opted into the new elements of Europol. In terms of looking forward, we are in discussions on that matter. I can tell him that we are one of the largest contributors to Europol. We play an important part in it. It will be part of the ongoing negotiations. [Official Report, 5 December 2016, Vol. 618, c. 10.]

Letter of correction from Amber Rudd:
An error has been identified in the response I gave to the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) during Questions to the Secretary of State for the Home Department.

The correct response should have been:

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that we recently announced our intention to opt in to the new elements of Europol. In terms of looking forward, we are in discussions on that matter. I can tell him that we are one of the largest contributors to Europol. We play an important part in it. It will be part of the ongoing negotiations.
Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 14 December 2016

DEFENCE

Armed Forces: Equipment

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on 12 December 2016.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Will my hon. Friend the Minister reassure me that we will continue to provide our armed forces with the best possible equipment and that, where appropriate and where that standard is met, that will be equipment developed and manufactured in the UK?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is right that we need to focus on the best equipment and getting the right capability for our armed forces. We will also always seek the best value for money for the taxpayer, but we will seek to get that UK content as strong as possible. The F-35 is an example. Fifteen per cent. of each of the 3,000 planes in the global programme are made at Warton in the north-west, and the UK has been selected as the global hub for a large number of elements for the maintenance, repair, overhaul and upgrade of those fantastic aircraft.— [Official Report, 12 December 2016, Vol. 618, c. 495.]

Letter of correction from Harriett Baldwin:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence.

The correct response should have been:

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is right that we need to focus on the best equipment and getting the right capability for our armed forces. We will also always seek the best value for money for the taxpayer, but we will seek to get that UK content as strong as possible. The F-35 is an example. Fifteen per cent. of each of the 3,000 planes in the global programme are made at Samlesbury in the north-west, and the UK has been selected as the global hub for a large number of elements for the maintenance, repair, overhaul and upgrade of those fantastic aircraft.

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Tidal Lagoons and UK Energy Strategy

The following is an extract from the response to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) during the Westminster Hall debate on tidal lagoons and UK energy strategy by the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) on 6 December 2016. The answer given was as follows:

Jesse Norman: I am sorry to have given up time for that intervention, because I was coming to that point. SeaGen, as the hon. Gentleman recognises, was a research test bed, and it is being decommissioned now. It received a £10 million grant from the Department, and those conclusions are being carefully assessed. It is a project in which there has already been public investment.


Letter of correction from Jesse Norman:

An error has been identified in a response I gave to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) during the Westminster Hall debate on tidal lagoons and UK energy strategy.

The correct response should have been:

Jesse Norman: I am sorry to have given up time for that intervention, because I was coming to that point. SeaGen, as the hon. Gentleman recognises, was a research test bed, and it is being decommissioned now. It received a £5.2 million grant from the Department, and those conclusions are being carefully assessed. It is a project in which there has already been public investment.
Ministerial Correction

Friday 16 December 2016

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Science and Innovation

The following is the response to the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) during Business, Energy and Industry Strategy questions by the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation on Tuesday 13 December 2016.

Joseph Johnson: This Government are strongly committed to science and innovation. We protected the science budget at the spending review in 2015. In the last autumn statement, a few days ago, we committed to spending a further £2 billion a year by the end of this Parliament. The creation of UK Research and Innovation, through the passage of the Higher Education and Research Bill, will increase the value and impact of our investments in science and innovation in the years ahead.


Letter of correction from Joseph Johnson:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) during Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions. The correct response should have been:

Joseph Johnson: This Government are strongly committed to science and innovation. We protected the science budget at the spending review in 2015. In the last autumn statement, a few days ago, we committed to spending a further £2 billion a year by 2020-21. The creation of UK Research and Innovation, through the passage of the Higher Education and Research Bill, will increase the value and impact of our investments in science and innovation in the years ahead.
Ministerial Correction

Monday 19 December 2016

TREASURY

UK Sovereign Wealth Fund

The following is an extract from the speech by the Economic Secretary to the Treasury on 14 December 2016.

Simon Kirby: Housing does raise productivity. It is a much-needed part of our economy. People need affordable homes to rent or buy. The building process, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, creates jobs and increases prosperity and productivity.

The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned a shale fund—a suggestion that others have made, too. The UK does not currently meet the criteria of a country that would benefit from a sovereign wealth fund: we have a high debt and a large deficit, and we do not have extensive commodity or natural resource exports. The development of the shale industry would leave a positive legacy for local communities and regions where it is based. The Government’s policy is for those communities to be able to choose to invest the funds for the long term. I thank the hon. Gentleman, as ever, for making a very thoughtful contribution that added greatly to the debate. — [Official Report, 14 December 2016, Vol. 618, c. 337WH.]

Letter of correction from Simon Kirby:

An error has been identified in my speech during the debate on the UK Sovereign Wealth Fund.

The correct wording should have been:

Simon Kirby: Housing does raise productivity. It is a much-needed part of our economy. People need affordable homes to rent or buy. The building process, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, creates jobs and increases prosperity and productivity.

The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned a shale fund—a suggestion that others have made, too. The UK does not currently meet the criteria of a country that would benefit from a sovereign wealth fund: we have a high debt and a large deficit, and we do not have extensive commodity or natural resource exports. The development of the shale industry would leave a positive legacy for local communities and regions where it is based. The Government’s policy is for those communities to be able to choose to invest the funds for the long term. I thank the hon. Gentleman, as ever, for making a very thoughtful contribution that added greatly to the debate.
Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 20 December 2016

EDUCATION

Technical and Further Education Bill

The following is an extract from a speech by the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), on Second Reading of the Technical and Further Education Bill on 14 November 2016.

Robert Halfon: A lot has been said about FE funding, but by 2020 more will be spent on FE and skills participation than at any time in our island’s history—£3.4 billion in the year 2019-20. My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) correctly described FE as a ladder of opportunity for young people. [Official Report, 14 November 2016, Vol. 617, c. 79.]

Letter of correction from Robert Halfon.

An error has been identified in my speech.

It should read:

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

Education provision: 16 to 19-Year-Olds

The following are extracts from Questions to the Secretary of State for Education on 14 November 2016:

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

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


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

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


Letter of correction from Robert Halfon.

Errors have been identified in the responses I gave to the hon. Members for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and for Wallasey (Ms Eagle).

The correct responses should have been:

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

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